

April 19, 2005

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Sir or Madam:

We write to respectfully present our submission with regards to the Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services.

Our submission, with regards to the terms of reference, are as follows:

1. Inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes for overseas adoptions:

Requirement to be Domiciled in Relevant State

Most states require the prospective adoptive parents to be domiciled in the relevant state. This can be extremely difficult for many people as there are many who are required as a result of their employment to change their location on a regular basis.

One example is a member of the Defence Force. Defence Force members are required to from time to time to be posted to various locations throughout the country. Many lower ranks may experience a variety of posting locations every 3 years. For more senior ranks this could be as much every 2 years. Given the cost of adoption it is more likely that it is the more senior ranks considering adoption.

To ask for a posting on compassionate grounds to remain in their current location or to a particular location in order to facilitate an Intercountry Adoption could be seen by the Defence Force as providing restricted service and may have a serious impact on the members career with regards to future progression or postings etc.

Time Variances

On average it appears the time from application to placement is about 3 years (varying by as much as 12 months either side in some states). I am cognisant of the fact that the relevant State Governments cannot be held responsible for time delays from when the applicants file is sent to the relevant country and the final placement, as this is entirely in the hands of the adoptive child's country of origin. However if all Australian applicants were managed and processed by the same Federal body as opposed to the numerous States and Territories surely this would result in a more streamlined process both within Australia and also Overseas. It would also mean the

standards and requirements would be identical across the board creating a much more even playing field.

Its difficult to understand how the Federal Government can delegate the management of Inter-country Adoption to the States and Territories who invariably create their own rules and regulations, when it is Commonwealth Legislation along with The Hague Convention that are the overriding factors controlling Inter-country Adoption in Queensland.

For example; a Queensland couple who had already one overseas adopted child found it necessary to relocate to the Northern Territory in order to meet age requirements at placement of their future adoptive child. To go through the application process in Queensland would mean they would fall outside the age limits and not be accepted by the time placement came. It took only seven months in their new location as opposed to an expected 3 years in Queensland. This is an unacceptable difference when considering it is Federal Policy that dictates the overriding requirements.

Assessment Fees

In Queensland, once a couple have established their eligibility they are required to be assessed. This currently attracts a fee of \$2000 and normally results in about four interviews with a social worker who then prepares a report on suitability. It is difficult to understand the decision that requires members of the public to pay for a service provided by the Queensland Public Service. Does this mean the public will soon be billed for calls for service by Police? This fee is again resultant of the many differing standards between the states operating under a Government umbrella.

Even if the assessment is sub contracted out to a private professional the absorption of this fee by Government or even reduction and/or subsidy of this fee should be a consideration to further bring the states into line under the Federal umbrella.

Acceptance of application

To our knowledge Queensland is the only state that has set time windows for prospective adoptive parents to enter their expression of interest. With the last opportunity late in 2004 only open for about 8 weeks it is not known when the next opportunity will arise.

All other states have permanent openings for persons to submit expressions of interest. A federal body establishing across the board standards would mean a more equitable systemic approach to the gruelling process of adoption.

2. Inconsistencies between the benefits and entitlements provided to families with their own birth children and those provided to families who have adopted children from overseas:

Baby Bonus

The federal Government established the Baby Bonus as a means to provide financial assistance to families with costs involved due the birth of a new baby into their family. These costs do not suddenly disappear when a child is adopted from overseas.

Intercountry adoption can and often does cost between \$30 000 - \$50 000, depending on the country of origin, all of which is borne by the adoptive parents. These costs are before any associated costs with the needs of the child once back in Australia. It is hypocritical and discriminatory of the Government to exclude adoptive families from the baby bonus especially when the vast majority of children are less than 1 year old.

Other Assistance

Australia is currently facing a negative growth rate and with couples having less kids and later in life the outlook for the country is of some concern. The Federal Government encourages families to have children to minimise any demographic impact our aging populating will have in the future.

To its credit the Federal Government has identified these issues to the Australian people and has developed initiatives to reduce our aging population and encourage an increased growth rate. It is difficult therefore to understand why no initiatives have been suggested to assist couples with Intercountry Adoption. Other countries have implemented methods designed to assist with the cost of adoption such as tax credits (on successful placement) or subsidised immigration fees.

Some fees are in no way able to be controlled by the Australian Government such as fees payable to the country of origin however immigration processing stamp duties etc are within the Australian Governments sphere of influence. It is not expected that the Government should foot the bill for the adoption but assistance in some areas would greatly assist in reducing the financial burden experienced.

In conclusion there are many inequities involved with Intercountry Adoption when considering the terms of reference as above. We commend the Federal Government for its initiative in establishing this inquiry and look forward to the results.

ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR

Sincerely,

Jeff and Rianne Muller