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19 April, 2005

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

RE: Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas

To the Committee,

We would like to congratulate the Federal Government on its inquiry into the inequities and inefficiencies in the Australian process of adopting children from overseas. The positive focus on how the Australian Government can better assist Australians who are adopting or have adopted children from overseas countries is most welcome. It is also especially timely, considering the increasing availability of prospective adoptive parents in Australia (with birth rates decreasing), the need for population growth, and the overwhelming global need for safe and nurturing placement of children from countries wracked by famine and poverty, short life expectancy (e.g. due to the AIDS epidemic), and natural disasters.

We have recently adopted our two beautiful daughters from Ethiopia, a process which here in Queensland took four and a half years. Our daughters were orphaned and yet were comparatively lucky to find their way into our inter-country adoption programme – we saw so many children who were not so lucky and were left to fend for themselves on the streets or, for the more fortunate, to remain in orphanages. The need for a response to this situation by affluent first-world nations is paramount. How can we not increase our response when we are capable, and our population is more than willing, and in fact also in need?

With regard to your terms of reference:

1. Any inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes for overseas adoptions.

You will have recently received documents from members of the Qld Australian African Children's Aid and Support Association Inc. (AACASA) highlighting the discrepancies in:

- processing times across states and territories (e.g. less than 12 months in VIC, NSW, SA and ACT vs up to 5 years in QLD); and
- the number of placements per capita (e.g. 1 per 12,462 in Act vs 1 per 101,990 in NSW).

These figures are based on June 2004 population statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics) and 2003-04 intercountry adoption statistics from the document entitled Adoptions Australia 2003-04 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004).

It is our understanding that there are also significant differences between states and territories in:

- processing costs;
- age limits for parents applying to adopt;
- medical considerations; and
- marital status (and length of marriage) as an eligibility requirement.

While duty of care for the adopted child has to be the primary concern in screening prospective adoptive parents, state-based inequity makes these criteria appear discriminatory.

One final issue appears inequitable across states – the perceived role of the involved government department varies between an educative and supportive role in some states to an evaluative one in others. This is apparent in both the preparation of prospective adoptive families and in the post-placement follow-up. For example, in some states the focus of post-placement visits is a supportive relationship designed to aid families' adjustment and coping in the post-placement period. In other states the focus is far more evaluative: a continuing assessment process where families feel the need to provide evidence of their adjustment and coping. This is likely to force families to under-report any difficulties and therefore not receive appropriate professional assistance should it be required. The role of education and support often falls to non-government support groups, which although they have a wealth of experience, are not necessarily professionally trained to provide appropriate assistance for mental health and family dynamic issues.

Obviously, the pool of parents applying to adopt a child from overseas will vary in different locations from year to year, however, it is our feeling that the abovementioned discrepancies are in large part due to the culture and internal processes of the local government departments entrusted with managing intercountry adoptions. It has been our experience that the departments can be under-resourced, with staff who are often demotivated, and procedures fraught with inefficiencies (e.g. in our case repeating paperwork such as criminal history checks, medicals and references for a third time only months prior to our final adoption order because there is a 2-year currency limit for administrative purposes).

It seems that intercountry adoption has not been given the priority, perceived value and positive focus it deserves. It is our view that national standards, whether operated by federal or state departments, would remove some of the discrepancies for families undertaking the commitment to intercountry adoption.

2. Any 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.

While we have been grateful for Medicare assistance in covering costs of vaccinations from the date of our children's entry into Australia, there will no doubt have been many submissions about the inequity in eligibility for Maternity Payment. This was presented as a measure to encourage population growth and to ease the financial burden on families due to the addition of a child. Addition of a child in the case of adoption (either local or inter-country) is rarely in the form of a new-born infant, however, with a 26-week age limit set as the eligibility requirement, adoptive families are primarily excluded, despite the fact that they incur far greater costs in establishing their families and reduced income due to the commitment for one parent to remain home for up to 12 months. It is our belief that adoptive parents will make no complaints about this latter requirement as their aim is to provide for the welfare of their new child or children, however, the financial impact on families and the inequity in eligibility for government assistance is worthy of mention. Alteration of the eligibility requirements for adoptive families will make minimal impact on departmental budgets, however it has the potential to significantly reduce the financial burden for many families.

Thank you for this opportunity to express our opinions on the issues surrounding intercountry adoption. We wish you every success in your inquiry and in the establishment of best practice parameters and optimal assistance for Australians who hope to adopt, are in the process of adopting, or have adopted children from overseas countries.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Martin Turner

Dr Karen Turner