

**Submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into
Adoption of Children from Overseas**

My husband and I have recently become parents to a precious baby boy born in Colombia on 12 May 2004. [REDACTED] was allocated to us on 30 July 2004 and by 30 September 2004 we were home in Australia after spending one month in Colombia meeting our child and completing the legal adoption process. [REDACTED] was four and half months old when he was introduced to his new extended family in Sydney.

Because [REDACTED] was under six months of age when we arrived home we were fortunate enough to qualify for the Federal Government's \$3,000 baby bonus. This indeed was a great help to us given we had spent upward of \$25,000 on legal and adoption fees and travel and accommodation expenses. Of course we also had the normal costs of bringing a baby into the house – cot, pram, high chair, and so on – and the medical costs associated with extensive health checks on our return to Sydney.

We saw the \$3,000 benefit as a real "bonus" because we knew if we had experienced delays leaving Australia to pick up [REDACTED] or delays in Colombia with the processing of papers, there was every chance that we may not arrive back in Australia until after [REDACTED] had turned six months of age. This was despite the fact that we may have already legally been his adoptive parents in Colombia before he turned six months of age. This is one area that should be reviewed by the Government in terms of a "measure" of when an Australian couple becomes parents to their adopted child. I would see a more appropriate measure being from the time that "custody" or "guardianship" is taken in the country of adoption. For many countries this would only be one or two weeks but others, like Colombia, it would be up to two months.

Friends of ours have just received news of their allocation of their child from the Philippines. Their darling little boy will likely be 14-16 months of age by the time things are in place for them to travel and they return from the Philippines. This is a common age of children being adopted from the Philippines and other Asian countries. In fact it is rare for Australian couples to be able to adopt a child under six months of age through intercountry adoption. It seems entirely unfair to us that because our child was under six months of age we qualified for the \$3,000 but this family, and many others, will not. They face the same issues of one parent giving up full time work to become a full-time carer. They face the same costs associated with bringing a baby into the family.

One month prior to my husband and I being allocated [REDACTED], my workplace introduced a new parental leave policy involving eight weeks paid maternity leave and one week of paid paternity leave. This has been a very positive step and reinforces my company's position as an employer of choice. Possibly because of my impending requirement to take 6-8 weeks leave to travel to Colombia, my employer was aware of the issues surrounding intercountry adoption and without question the maternity leave entitlements were offered to me as adoption leave. Whilst my husband no longer works full-time in order to be at home parenting [REDACTED], I was able to take up to eight weeks of paid maternity leave to focus on the adoption of our son. This was extremely valuable as it was uncertain how long we would need to spend in Colombia, with it estimated to be between four and eight weeks (or possibly longer if there were medical or other problems experienced).

When my company introduced its new Parental Leave Policy I was aware that several other "forward thinking" companies had paid parental leave arrangements in place but very few offer adoption leave at the same level of maternity leave. From my experience I have seen companies offering adoption leave (for either the mother or the father) in line with the paternity leave entitlements, which is commonly one week of paid leave. Whilst mothers who adopt children do not have to allow themselves time to recover from labour and to adjust to the physical demands of breastfeeding etc, there are attachment issues (which are more serious the older the child is) and more often than not travel requirements mean that adoption leave will always need to exceed one week. I think many organisations that have family friendly parental leave policies have not clearly thought through the implications that adoption has for families, particularly today when the vast majority of adoptions require overseas travel. An improved education process for employers would greatly benefit adoptive families. The Federal Government could clearly play a role in this area.

For us, the journey of adoption has been a privilege and an amazing experience, albeit the emotional highs and lows were challenging at times. The process from application to returning home with [REDACTED] took us two and a half years. Whilst this waiting time is relatively short, it is frustrating that it took 18 months to be approved by the New South Wales Department of Community Services (DoCS) and only 12 months to be approved and to work our way through the waiting list in Colombia. Some programs take considerably longer due to longer waiting lists in the country of adoption and whilst there will always be those differences there is clearly opportunity to improve processes in Australia if only increased resources were allocated to intercountry adoption.

In NSW Intercountry Adoption is managed by the adoption unit at DoCS. The clear message we have received from DoCS is that their primary goal is to look after children in the state of NSW, not to bring children into NSW. They obviously recognise that they have the carriage of adoptions also and are currently trying to improve their processes and service but clearly inadequate funds are allocated to this part of DoCS. DoCS has recently increased its fees for intercountry adoption from approximately \$3,000 to \$10,000 to ensure that intercountry adoption services receive no form of government "subsidy" but rather that its clients (prospective adoptive parents) pay a full fee for service. This has not however, resulted in increased resources being allocated to the processing or management of Intercountry Adoptions by the State Government. My husband and I believe that a move to accredited private adoption agencies is necessary to ensure that Australia can process and manage intercountry adoptions in line with other developed countries (eg. Norway, Sweden, the USA, France and so on). The Federal Government should encourage all states and territories to adopt a consistent approach of accrediting adoption agencies for intercountry adoption..

The lack of appropriate State Government resources and the financial burden on prospective families creates a disincentive for many New South Wales residents to consider intercountry adoption as an alternative for forming a family. This flies in the face of the Australian Government's appropriate emphasis on supporting families and encouraging couples to have children to support population growth. There is clearly a lack of coherent direction between the bureaucracy at the State level and policy at the Federal level.

[REDACTED]
18 April 2005

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] NSW [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]