

22nd April 2005

SUBMISSION NO. 122
AUTHORISED: 25.05.05 *[Signature]*

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services

Dear Secretary

Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas

My name is Rachael Emerson and I am an adoptive parent who currently resides in Queensland. I wish to commend you on undertaking this enquiry into the current practice and policies surrounding Intercountry Adoption. It is an immensely worthwhile program, for the children and families involved and for Australia as a nation. Sadly, it is in a state of crisis and in critical need of review.

My husband and I were recently allocated twin baby daughters from Taiwan. We feel so incredibly blessed and privileged, that even now while we wait for permission to travel and collect them, we feel as if we are still living in a dream. Our journey has taken us 5 years from when we first made the initial phone call, to the (then) Department of Families, here in Queensland. We were then caught up in a process of assessments, medicals, and lots and lots of self-imposed education on what was to be the culture, that would forever remain apart of us. Although this process was at times extremely confronting and challenging, we were fully committed; as we wholeheartedly believed that we needed to demonstrate that we would be 'what was best for the children'.

Over this time, I have developed a thorough knowledge of Intercountry Adoption policy here in Queensland as I am now the Coordinator of Townsville Intercountry Adoption Support Group. I greatly admire the effort of Minister Mike Reynolds and feel encouraged by his level of support and cooperation with this issue. I welcome the opportunity to share my thoughts on this issue with your committee, as I strongly believe that a united approach to intercountry adoption process across both government and community sectors, will ensure effective, meaningful policy, that results in solid happy families.

1. Inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes.

Current and practices need to change to ensure consistency and efficiency. There are a number of practices that need particular attention:-

- Queensland needs to abolish its current practice of randomly opening the Expression of Interest. It was previously shut for 2 years, creating a panic when it finally reopened. I personally would prefer to see it reopened every 12 months at a designated time, to reassure couples that they have time to seriously consider their motivation to adopt, without feeling the pressure of having to put in an 'insurance' application.
- They fees vary considerably across the states. Queensland increased their fees and asked couples to meet the cost of their assessment (\$2000 approximately) in response the Minister stated this would free up the

Departments resources and enable them to process 100-110 files per year. This has never happened!

- Eligibility criteria such as marital status and length of time married, age and medical requirements. With regards to medical requirements not only what medical conditions are accepted but how unacceptable medical conditions are dealt with varies between states.
- The differences for first time couples and subsequent adoptions for couples eg in states such as Queensland, couples who have already adopted have to do as much in terms of work books, medicals, assessments and reviewed by the department etc where as in other states the workload and requirements are far less. We all recognise that couples need to be properly assessed however a middle ground must be found.
- The Federal Government needs to invest more resources into the establishment of new agreements with other countries. This is the only viable option to alleviating the current crisis that exists with number of children desperately in need of loving families and the extensive number of 'waiting' prospective adoptive couples. I reiterate the IAFQ's stance that 'Australia is putting a lot of pressure on a limited number of countries. There are many countries that have a need and a desire to be involved in an International adoption program. Some states are a little more active in this area than others however overall this is an area that needs immediate attention'.

2. Inconsistencies in benefit and entitlements

The main inconsistency here is the maternity payment to parents who have care of their child by 26 weeks. Most Intercountry adoptions are not processed before the child or children are 26 weeks old. This is extremely unfair and makes no logical sense. If the Government's main priority it to consider the 'best needs of the child,' why is it that the entitlement is only available up the age of 26 weeks? Are the families of older children less worthy?

Due to the nature of the process very few couple are granted custody of their adoptive children before this age. Adoption is a very costly process, we as adoptive parents understand this and accept the substantial legal/processing costs involved. We are not looking for additional government hand-outs, we simply want to be treated fairly, and expect the same entitlements as biological parents. I believe this policy should be changed immediately and should be back-dated to when this legislation was introduced, to offer support to those families who have missed out – for no valid reason.

In conclusion, I feel strongly that the Government is very hypocritical. We are adoptive parents jump through many 'legislative hoops' to demonstrate that we are stable, educated, well-resourced, healthy, young, and are more than capable to become excellent parents. We are mostly likely going to raise our children in a loving and supported environment, encouraging them to grow into healthy, educated, productive members of society – why doesn't the government do more to support us!

If Government wants what is the “Best interest of the child” then it is their turn – we already do our bit! It’s time to:

- Immediately develop programs with new and willing countries e.g South Africa, Vietnam, Chile etc.
- Develop more practical and realistic policy, regarding age, health, age of children/sibling groups etc.
- Change the process to ensure files are sent faster.
- Ensure that Expressions of Interest are opened regularly.
- Increasing staffing in these Departments if necessary.
- Support adoptive parents by allowing them to access the same entitlements as biological parents, and seriously consider following the USA’s tax break.

I wish you well with this initiative and am looking forward to experiencing some positive outcomes.

Kindest Regards

Rachael Emerson