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**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Reference: Adoption of children from overseas

FRIDAY, 22 JULY 2005

BRISBANE

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Friday, 22 July 2005

Members: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop (*Chair*), Mrs Irwin (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Cadman, Ms Kate Ellis, Mrs Elson, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Markus, Mr Quick and Mr Ticehurst

Members in attendance: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Quick, Mrs Irwin

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

How the Australian Government can better assist Australians who are adopting or have adopted children from overseas countries (intercountry placement adoptions) with particular reference to:

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

WITNESSES

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WALSH, Mrs Margaret-Mary, Private capacity 15

Committee met at 1.13 pm**PEDERSEN, Mr Cec, Private capacity**

CHAIR (Mrs Bronwyn Bishop)—I declare open this hearing of the inquiry into adoption of children from overseas. Today is the inquiry's second day of hearings in Brisbane. Yesterday the committee took a great deal of evidence from adoption groups, parents and prospective parents. We also took short informal community statements from interested individuals. The committee appreciates the time that these people set aside to help us with the inquiry. This evidence will assist the committee in its deliberations. As I noted yesterday, this hearing is open to the public and a transcript of what is said will be available via the committee's web site. If you would like further details about the inquiry or the transcripts, please ask any of the committee staff here at the hearing.

CHAIR—Thank you for coming. I invite you to make an opening statement.

Mr Pedersen—I thank the committee for the privilege and the opportunity to appear today. Although I am not representing any specific group, I bring with me a significant background of involvement in intercountry adoptions over the last 6½ years. On a personal level, I am from regional Queensland and I am the adoptive father of two gorgeous little Filipino sisters who came into our lives by allocation on 3 March 2003, after a four-year sojourn through Queensland's intercountry adoption processes. So far as I am aware, my wife and I are the only fertile couple without biological children to have gone through Queensland's intercountry or general adoption system, so that makes us a little different. We were also the first non-biological parents for a number of years to be allocated siblings and in particular older siblings; our daughters were five and four when we got them.

Our experience with the Queensland system has been mixed. Because we were part of the old regime, before the changes introduced by Minister Spence, we encountered many delays in having things done in a timely and compassionate manner. However, the allocation and post-adoption experiences have been wonderful and I cannot speak more highly of the management and staff of Queensland intercountry adoption section and both Minister Spence and Minister Reynolds for the efforts they have made to try and improve the systems. However, having that said, I also acknowledge that we still have a long way to go.

I spent 2½ years as vice-president of International Adoptive Families of Queensland, IAFQ, and was personally involved in Minister Spence's overhaul of the adoption section and the establishment of a dedicated intercountry adoptions unit. I have had input into the new draft legislation, which is proceeding through the system, and I am an invited member of the Queensland Minister for Child Safety's ministerial adoption consultative forum. On a professional level, I have a significant background in strategic and general management and, in particular, human resource development. I am a member of the governing council of the University of Southern Queensland and I am also a member of the regional advisory committee of the Australian Institute of Management.

My written submission tried to present to the committee some of the complex relationships surrounding intercountry adoption, particularly at the strategic and policy levels. These, the strategic and political policy areas, in my brief have not been addressed at any significant level

by either the state or federal governments and I believe that we have a unique opportunity to make a significant difference for all stakeholders, especially if we can overcome federal and state antipathy.

I was heartened by Mrs Bishop's reported comments in the media yesterday about greater federal involvement in the intercountry adoption process. In particular, there are some areas that I argue. The first of those is that the approach taken to intercountry adoption in Australia needs a major philosophical change and overhaul to achieve a balance between appropriate safeguards for the children and the parents and the efficient and effective use of finite resources, both within Australia and the relinquishing countries.

Australia has a highly overregulated and controlled intercountry adoption process. Apart from the individual state government departments, the Australian government has an involvement through several departments, notably Immigration, Health, Family, Foreign Affairs and a small involvement by the Attorney-General. Intercountry adoption should be legislated for and facilitated by the Australian government, not the individual states and territories. The existing expertise within the state and territory domain, however, should be retained on an agency basis to implement overarching federal legislation. There is an incredible level of experience and knowledge and it is a very tough area, and I think to not incorporate that into implementing any federal legislation would do us a disservice.

Intercountry adoption, in my view, should be under the overall control of the department of foreign affairs, and the existing state and territory approaches to developing new overseas partnerships should be taken over and pursued at senior minister level between the respective national governments; by 'senior minister level' I am referring to the foreign minister. Those are my main opening comments.

CHAIR—Thank you very much.

Mrs IRWIN—You have suggested that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should manage the legislation for the states and territories. Why have you decided on the department of foreign and affairs and, say, not the Attorney-General's or the department of immigration?

Mr Pedersen—Within my written submission I mention Australia's potential and capacity to play a much more significant role as an international citizen. The area of adoption generally, but in particular intercountry adoption, is a very complex one. It is not a simple matter of procuring children from relinquishing countries. There is a very complex set of relationships. Most of the countries are very embarrassed about the fact that they cannot care for their own children. We see over the last couple of decades that a change of government in a country will also result in a change in policy. For example, Romania, with a change of government, made a decision that, instead of relinquishing children, they would care for them internally.

The sensitivities that are involved, I believe, are much better handled—the relationships are much better handled—by the foreign minister as part of the portfolio of discussions that they have. In some instances it may be that foreign aid is the most appropriate way of supporting children. Although I am an adoptive father, I have a very strong belief that the ideal situation is to care for the kids in their own country and culture; reality is something quite different. In some

instances, foreign aid may be the preferred way to go. In other instances it may be sponsorship programs—whether or not that is for education or health reasons. In others, it is the facilitating of the adoption. I believe that, out of all the departments, the foreign minister has probably the best capacity to have those sensitive discussions at senior government to senior government ministerial level. The states do not have the resources and I do not believe they have the capacity to be able to have those discussions.

Mrs IRWIN—I find it interesting that in your opening statement you stated that you thought the previous minister and the current minister here in Queensland were doing quite a good job when it came to intercountry adoptions but you felt that they still have a long way to go. What changes would you like to see the Queensland government make?

Mr Pedersen—To agree to federal enabling legislation. Adoptions are not a high vote area, so trying to get adequate policy and resources has been a challenge. The two most recent ministers have certainly done a lot in that regard. There is a perception by many that it is the role of government to provide children to infertile couples. I do not pass any judgment on that. However, at the end of the day it really is about the kids—it is about the children and providing a better life for them. Because of the complexities involved in adoption, particularly intercountry adoption, with finite resources both here and by the relinquishing countries, there will always be many things that could be done but are unable to be done.

So there is a requirement for a very significant partnership arrangement between non-government organisations that are able to play a role, particularly in the post-adoption areas, and the technical processing of eligibility and the adoption placements. Rightfully that is a government agency role, whether it is state or federal. I believe that the significant variations from state to state in the legislation, the duplication of resources, the inflexibility of it in particular and especially if couples need to move from state to state—and that is not infrequent these days—

Mrs IRWIN—We heard that a lot yesterday from many people who came before this inquiry: Queensland is losing good people who are moving, say, to Tasmania or to the ACT because the time frame is a lot shorter compared to that in Queensland.

Mr Pedersen—Yes. It is an interesting area because there is a lot of rhetoric and a lot of, I guess, folklore about the incapacity of the Queensland system to do things. Whilst that may be able to be substantiated, if you are looking at numbers and figures, the big challenge is that over the last four years in particular we have gone through substantial change. So we have gone from a situation where the minister was allocating approximately \$50,000 a year for all assessments—general adoptions and intercountry—where you supposedly had a minister's personal opinion that intercountry adoption is the next stolen generation. So you have a culture or mentality, with Minister Spence coming and making significant changes.

With the benefit of hindsight, unquestionably we could have done things in a different and better way. For example, the closing of the expression of interest register: I do not think anyone would deny that that has not worked well. In terms of the number of applicants that are being processed now, there has been a significant move forward. A big frustration is that significantly the intercountry adoption community does not get on to the strategic bandwagon. It is all about the securing of children, the caring for children. So it is all done largely at the micro level and it

is very hard to get meaningful conversations occurring about the bigger picture stuff. For example, the legislation that is coming through Queensland now, despite all the community forums—

CHAIR—Tell us something about that legislation.

Mr Pedersen—It was foreshadowed at the time that Minister Spence had the interventions four years ago.

CHAIR—I note that a lot of witnesses spoke well of Minister Spence and what she endeavoured to do and they spoke poorly of Minister Reynolds. The evidence seemed to be that the good work she had put in place had been disrupted.

Mr Pedersen—That is intriguing because I think both of those people have made a substantial contribution in their own right. For example, an initiative of Minister Reynolds is the consultative forum.

CHAIR—We have heard evidence about that.

Mr Pedersen—Now for the first time we actually have all the stakeholders coming together. There is a level of transparency. There is also a culture within the intercountry adoption community that, if they do not like what the manager of intercountry adoptions is doing, they can go totally around that section to the minister's office and the minister will fix it.

Mr QUICK—Isn't that understandable considering that it takes so many years and there is no transparency? Wouldn't it be simple, when you applied for an expression of interest, to get a number? I go to the ANZ bank at Manuka and I get a number and then at least I know where I am in the great scheme of things. But not to know where you are in the waiting list—

CHAIR—And not to know what the criterion is.

Mr QUICK—We have heard evidence that people are being favoured because they are keeping quiet. There are others who are frustrated and have been waiting for years vocalise that in the media and other places and, because you have one person in total control of the allocations, whether that is true or not, that person is the judge and executioner and sole decision maker. That frustration is understandable.

Mr Pedersen—That frustration is understandable. The facts do not bear out from the experience I have had. In 6½ years I do not think you would have found too many people more actively involved and up the ribs of the minister and the department than I have been.

Mr QUICK—But we heard evidence yesterday that suddenly people get a phone call to say, 'Are you busy?' It is a sort of offhand thing, the dialogue between the dedicated unit, and I am interested for you to tell me how many people are there. As you said, \$50,000 is one public servant at about ASO level 6 or ASO level 4, which to my mind is someone who is far below the status that is required for something as important as this.

Mr Pedersen—The \$50,000 was prior to Minister Spence's intervention four years ago. That was the amount allocated to carry out the social worker assessments. I do not know the exact figure but I believe the cost was in the order of about \$1,500 per assessment. As part of an undertaking we agreed as an intercountry adoption community to increase that fee to around \$2,000. The undertakings were that, until the backlog was cleared, they would process as many as 100 to 110 each year. For varying reasons that was almost achieved in the first year and it probably was not in the second. There was a process review carried out by Peat Marwick that is also resulting in a significant level of improvement in the file handling, which was a manual system. There was the creation of a dedicated intercountry adoptions unit as well as general adoptions, so we have a separation there. There is also the new legislation. At that time I believe Minister Spence had a rightful expectation that the new legislation would probably be ready within about two years.

CHAIR—She certainly did not expect there would be a window opening of eight weeks, did she?

Mr Pedersen—No.

CHAIR—You adopted your two little girls in March 2003; you were successful.

Mr Pedersen—That is when we got the allocation.

CHAIR—How long had you been waiting? When did you first apply?

Mr Pedersen—We made the phone calls to the department in November 1998 to request an information pack. We received that pack in April 1999. There was a significant delay just in being able to apply. We had been through the assessment process and our file went to the Philippines in August 2002, and that was approximately four years to that time. We were allocated on 3 March 2003 and we came together with the girls on 16 June 2003, so there was 4½ years to that time. To finalisation, when the final adoption order went through on 23 June 2004, it was 5½ years. That is a long time to wait; however, the outcome was never in doubt in our minds. We challenged the system in three major areas. One was that we were able to have biological children and have chosen not to, so there was justifying why. The second aspect to that was that we wanted siblings and, because we live in a rural area, there were lots of very good reasons why we wanted to do that. The other was that we wanted older children, and in Queensland older children are regarded as being three years or above.

Certainly we ran up against a lot of opposition. There are two ways of looking at that opposition. One is that you can see it as an imposition by the bureaucrats or the public service, that they are looking over their shoulder to find reasons to discount us. That was never ever likely to happen. What they were endeavouring to do was to ascertain, firstly, our suitability to be adoptive parents and also what capacity we had and what support mechanisms we had, because they cannot afford to have kids come in and then for it to go pear shaped. The social worker visits, for example—whilst they were very intrusive and very deep stuff and it dredged up a lot of stuff that I probably would have preferred not to revisit—at the end of the day we were always left in a situation of questioning and looking at our capacity to be able to handle it.

With the benefit of hindsight, when you get two little girls who cannot speak any English at all and you are putting them in a totally new environment, you soon learn what sleep deprivation and stress are about, and I think there were times when we were running on the fumes of the fumes of an empty tank. The department were extremely supportive in that because they made regular phone calls to see how we were going. They brought forward the first post-adoption visit to make sure that we were not at risk. So it was a very supportive partnership. I say that because I know what they were intending to do. They were not being big brother with us. That is the reality that I observe with most of the stuff. A lot of it is perceptual stuff. Many people have the attitude, 'Tell them what you think they need to know in order to be able to get through the process.' That has not been my experience.

Mr QUICK—How would the system change if the Commonwealth assumed responsibility and we used each of the states and territories as agencies?

Mr Pedersen—Firstly, you would have a common set of rules. That is a major issue, particularly for couples who are having to move. We hear a lot about people moving from state to state because they think it will improve their chances. There are a lot of people who move because of occupation.

CHAIR—No, they move to improve their chances, and it does.

Mr Pedersen—Yes, some do. The other is having a more constant set of charges and fees. I believe that it will increase the likelihood of a greater number of allocations coming to Australia. It is very difficult at the moment because of the finite resources. Each state takes the responsibility for coordinating a couple of countries. In Queensland, even under the best of circumstances, we have only been able to get senior staff to the Philippines and to Ethiopia. So there is the capacity to get people to go and have the discussions. We have spoken at ministerial level. Minister Spence had intended to use the agent-generals as part of that, but in reality discussions need to be at a much higher level. So get rid of the duplication, have a common set of rules and guidelines and fees and charges—

Mrs IRWIN—Sorry for interrupting you there. In New South Wales the fees are over \$9,000 and I think in Queensland they are over \$2,000. So you are saying the same fee for each state and territory?

CHAIR—Should we move to \$10,000?

Mr Pedersen—That is a judgment that I cannot make, because on the one hand you will have some people who will argue that you will dislocate some people because of the affordability. My head tells me that, if those initial fees are a problem, wait until you actually have to face the reality of rearing children. It is a personal judgment I would not like to make.

Mrs IRWIN—We have IVF and that is subsidised by the government.

Mr Pedersen—We faced that dilemma when we agreed with Minister Spence to increase the fee, because I think it went from about \$750 and they were proposing \$1,200 and we as the intercountry adoption community agreed to \$2,000. She and her senior people were very surprised when we made that offer, but it was a balance of being able to provide sufficient

resources—and we were very clear about; it is not a full fee for service but the expectation was that we would expect to see the assessments proceed much more quickly, and they did. But what the dollar figure of it should be—\$10,000 would probably preclude some. If you are looking at it from an economic perspective, the supply and demand factor says, yes, you can probably put a higher fee on it because there is no shortage of people who want to be adoptive parents to kids.

CHAIR—And there is no shortage of children in desperate need of being adopted either, are there?

Mr Pedersen—No.

Mr QUICK—With the ability to claim a tax rebate on expenses it would not make any difference, would it?

Mr Pedersen—I do not believe it will. I think the issue of the allowances to me is largely a peripheral issue. We have received the grand total of \$14 of assistance, and that was for four hours of subsidised child care on one occasion. I am not griping about that because that was not the reason why we chose to become adoptive parents. It has been a very expensive exercise. But if you are looking at it on a cost-benefit basis, had we chosen to breed our own, without wanting to make it sound crude, the cost involved over a prolonged period of time would have been significantly more. It is just that we had a drain of about \$70,000 in that first year. Of that, the application fees and charges were about \$10,000 because of the two children. The outgoings in terms of clothing—for example, we brought them into a Queensland winter and the kids were having four and five changes of clothing a day. So it does not take too long to run away with that money and then the forgone salary for a year is about another \$35,000. In terms of our family's liquid cash, between \$70,000 and \$80,000 went out in that year.

CHAIR—But you chose to do that.

Mr Pedersen—And we chose to do that, and we were prepared for it.

CHAIR—Whereas other parents have not had that choice.

Mr Pedersen—In what regard?

CHAIR—In that they could not have their own children and so they chose to adopt a child. So in a sense they did not have the choice you had.

Mr Pedersen—The costs are going to be similar whether or not you choose to—

CHAIR—It is nothing to do with costs. You had a choice that other people who you have described as not having a strategic approach did not have. You have said many of the things that they have said, actually. I would like to hear from you what your strategic approach is that is different from what we have heard.

Mr Pedersen—I have not been party to the other discussions.

CHAIR—No, but you did criticise them. You said it was impossible to have a conversation with them at a strategic level, that they were always talking at the minutiae level. I think that is somewhat unfair because basically they are saying the same things that you are. Perhaps you could tell me about the strategic approach that you think you have which is different.

Mr Pedersen—When you have one-on-one discussions with couples who are either contemplating—

CHAIR—No, just tell me your strategic approach.

Mr Pedersen—My strategic approach is that we need federal legislation.

CHAIR—Everybody else has said that too.

Mr Pedersen—Okay, I am pleased.

CHAIR—But when you say ‘federal legislation’, what do you mean by that?

Mr Pedersen—At the moment we have seven lots of state legislation. Whilst there are similarities involved in that, I believe that intercountry adoption should be a federal responsibility. The kids become Australian citizens.

CHAIR—That is a different question. I made this point very clear yesterday—that the law that governs the relationship between children and their parents and creating a parent-child relationship is state based law, state law. Constitutionally it is state law. But in intercountry adoptions we are, in fact, creating new citizens—that is federal. However, to say that you want federal legislation begs the question that there is no power under section 51, unless you invoke the external affairs power, which this government certainly is not going to do. So when you are talking about outcomes like having a commonality of an approach or set of forms, it should not be beyond the wit of state governments at a COAG process to sit down and work out what is the best information that needs to be collected. For instance, we had a witness yesterday tell us that they too had adopted from the Philippines. For the first child they had 17 pages of information to forward. For the second child they had 32 pages about three years later, but if you were in Tasmania it was only 10 pages.

So here is the Philippines government hearing from entirely separate entities within the country of Australia who are behaving almost like separate countries. It should not be beyond the wit of state governments in a COAG process to work out what is the best form of practice and to agree that this is the way they will go. Whether or not then a state government chooses to subsidise the fees for the obligations it undertakes under the responsibility it has for checking the things that are in place is that state government’s decision. But when you start to look at questions like intercountry agreements, which are undertaken by federal governments on a country to country basis, and when you have the obligations under the Hague convention—a federally, nationally entered into agreement—those are the areas where the Commonwealth, which has been very hands off and allowed the state agencies, needs NGOs. Those are very strategic questions that need to be answered—whether or not an NGO would do the job much better than a government department which is focused normally on children who are abused and

what is the perspective they have? Those are the sorts of strategic questions that I think need to be focused on and that is why I asked you what sorts of strategic ideas you had.

Mr Pedersen—Not dissimilar to what you have outlined. I realise that the prospect of having enabling federal legislation, even if it were possible, maybe a difficult one to implement because of the states.

CHAIR—It is not possible. We have a constitution. It is not one of the powers that the states have handed over.

Mr Pedersen—No. There are two key areas. One is the resources and the variation in the legislation from state to state. The other is the availability of children under the Hague convention that may come into Australia. If it is not possible to have enabling federal legislation, at the very least we need to have the federal government and the state governments working in a more cooperative way—firstly, to facilitate those higher level government discussions—

CHAIR—At the moment there is no lack of cooperation. It is just that the federal government is totally hands-off and is given the responsibility—for instance, Victoria manages China and Korea; Tasmania manages the newly emerging negotiations I think with South Africa under a memorandum of understanding. So there is a lot of work to be done there to make it work much more efficiently.

Mr QUICK—As you mentioned, the ethos in the various state government departments needs to change because, as the chairperson said, we have a department whose principal *raison d'être* is to look after abused children and the same department has intercountry adoption. From my understanding—and I have only been up here a couple of days—listening to witnesses there is a real antipathy to overseas adoptions. You need a departmental mind shift not only in this state but I imagine some of the others and then to get the rail gauge mentality sorted, some people need a good swift kick. Whether you do that through financial incentives or other things I think it needs to happen sooner rather than later. You waited 5½ years and you must have the patience of Job. It is like when your child is born you put them down for the Melbourne Cricket Club and 50 years later you get in. There are expressions of interest and people are putting their names down in the hope, but not in the real expectation, that they will be processed. There is a huge frustration within the community.

Mr Pedersen—With respect to that, there are a lot of names going down but in many instances there are couples who are not at that stage where they want to move forward. So the department actually does have a lot of problems in trying to get people to make steady progress. There are a lot of mechanics that are involved in managing the process that certainly can be improved. I think it is grossly unfair to infer that intercountry adoptions really do not have the attention of the current minister. I can assure you that they do.

CHAIR—Nobody has said that at all.

Mr QUICK—I am, I suppose, accusing the department—quite often ministers have wonderful ideas but the departments thwart them at every opportunity. From my two days of experience up here, that seems to be the case—that the department is being bloody-minded about the issue and, unless there is a cultural change within the department here, people are going to be

totally dissatisfied. I am interested in this ministerial forum. Hopefully if we came back in two years, there will have been a huge mind shift and we will not have the need for people to relocate to other states, which I think is totally absurd.

Mr Pedersen—The ministerial forum has the other opportunities that the intercountry adoption community have had, so we have had many opportunities to contribute to policy development. Typically when those calls go out, you may get one or two people who will bother putting stuff in. We have a lot of rhetoric going on in the background but very few taking advantage of that opportunity. There certainly is a perception that if we are seen to be outspoken we are going to be victimised. I can only reiterate my own experiences and I am being dispassionate about that—that is not what I have observed, that is not what I have seen. Knowing a number of the personalities involved, it is not their way of doing business. However it is a different issue from a perceptual point of view.

In terms of working cooperatively with the department, there are many opportunities, and there have been over the last few years, for the various stakeholders to get together and to work in a partnership arrangement with the department to advance. For whatever reason, that has not happened. It may be a deficiency in terms of leadership within our own community. It may be that there is a stronger focus on the processes of being able to get applications through because, certainly in terms of the post-production adoption services, there is very limited stuff that can be done and very limited resources. But we do not have those communications. The intercountry adoption community is very good at coming together in times of adversity and exerting pressure and has become a very effective political lobby group.

CHAIR—It sounds like they were needed.

Mr QUICK—But something as simple as their international day, even if someone from the department fronted up and gave a tacit support—

Mr Pedersen—But they do.

Mr QUICK—Does the minister rock up and be part of it?

Mr Pedersen—The minister was there last year. The minister made announcements last year about firstly removing the age barrier and there was a second issue—I cannot recall it off the top of my head. That announcement was made. That has been supported. The minister has had public forums with the intercountry adoption people. In fact this minister is probably more accessible, particularly through his policy advisory staff, than at any other time.

Mr QUICK—So in your opinion we will not see a similar sort of stuff-up with opening the thing for eight weeks and causing pandemonium? The whole process will be—

Mr Pedersen—In terms of opening for eight weeks, the minister has asked the adoption community—

CHAIR—I might add, just before we go on about that, that we did invite the minister or someone from his department to attend and give evidence. He declined and said that he did not think it was necessary. It is a pity he cannot come and speak for himself.

Mr Pedersen—It is. But the intercountry adoption community have been invited to put forward. We certainly have had discussions at the consultative forum about what is the best way to move forward. A view has been put forward by the **International Adoptive Families of Queensland** that we need to move ahead on the basis of people being more proactive. So that, if you are not making decisions or not going to education days or whatever, you do not fall out of the system but you actually drop back in the progress.

I believe that it is not inconceivable that expressions of interest may be called on an annual basis. I have personal reservations about that. I still believe the best way of doing it is to have it as a rolling system so that people are able to put their application in as they want to. The big unknown at the moment is the number of people who for varying reasons may not want to proceed or may not want to proceed as quickly as the system will let them. There certainly is capacity to move it faster through the system if we did not have the blockage that is occurring now. It is not just something that is happening at the departmental level.

CHAIR—I am sorry but after all the evidence we have heard we have to say that that is a problem of the minister's own making. There was no understanding that the freeze would be lifted for eight weeks and then put on again. It came as a complete surprise to people. People were panicked and when they asked when it would open again they were told, 'Oh we don't know; it might be years.' It is no surprise that people would put their name in saying, 'It might not ever happen again.' That is of the minister's own making. There are no ifs, buts or maybes that make it anything else.

Mr Pedersen—But what I am saying to you is that there is an opportunity there for people in the intercountry adoption community to input as to how the systems should work, and they do not.

CHAIR—They thought they were doing that when the window was shut.

Mrs IRWIN—Can you tell me if there are any post-adoption services in place? You were saying when you were interviewed about the adoption of your two gorgeous daughters from the Philippines they wanted to know support mechanism you had in place. When you brought the two girls back to Australia, were there any post-adoption services you could obtain?

Mr Pedersen—Yes, I was able to access the departmental staff and particularly the social worker who had done the initial assessments. They, in fact, did the four post-adoption visits in that following 12 months. Apart from that, there is very little that is provided by the government, and I do not believe that they necessarily have to. We do have a very good network of country support groups. In our case we have the Philippines support group where there are a lot of organised activities. Because I do not live in Brisbane we also access a lot of the things in Toowoomba. There is a very active intercountry adoption community in Toowoomba and they have stuff on a regular basis, literally every month; sometimes it is playgroups, sometimes it is dinners. There is access but there is a big challenge because the area is growing. A critical phase with intercountry adoptees, as it is for most, is the teenagers going through puberty. For intercountry adoptees it becomes a very difficult stage of identity. That is a big area that we probably have not felt the full thrust of at this stage because intercountry adoption is still relatively new, certainly in terms of the numbers. It is an area that we certainly need to pay significant attention to.

CHAIR—So there is no government support, but the non-government organisations give good support?

Mr Pedersen—Yes, we support each other. I personally feel that is one of the really important parts of having those NGOs, that level of pastoral support.

CHAIR—But they do not get any government funding either.

Mr Pedersen—No, and I do not know that they actually need it. In the main, a lot of the things that we are providing are social or cultural support for each other. Things like international day are a significant issue, but it is not a major impost on the intercountry adoption community. There is no reason why that cannot remain largely self-funded. I do not believe government needs to contribute to that. But this area of understanding and the support mechanisms—

Mrs IRWIN—Sharing knowledge.

Mr Pedersen—Yes, something that we are going through at the moment is that our eldest daughter has realised that she has a biological mother. I have no way of securing information about her mother. I have a very limited amount and we are lucky, we have more than many people. But more than anything what would help me at the moment is if I had a name that I could give to her. We know she can access that information on her Queensland file when she turns 18 but the difficulty there is that we go through all the difficult puberty phase and may do a wonderful job of preparing her for getting the information, but her biological mum may have died in the meantime. So this issue of very discrete access to some information is a tough one. I know that in Queensland if any of the staff release that information it is a major offence. I can also repeat that it is a source of considerable concern because they can see the benefit and the necessity to be able to selectively be able to manage some of that.

Mr QUICK—Will the new legislation resolve some of that? Yesterday we heard evidence that in newsletters you cannot publish photos of children and extol the virtues of the wonderful things that the kids are doing. Is that also being considered as part of the ministerial forum to change the legislation to do that?

Mr Pedersen—I am sure that it will take on a greater level of prominence because the forum only meets approximately every three months.

CHAIR—No, the new legislation will get rid of the censorship, will it?

Mr QUICK—Because we find it hard to believe that in Queensland—

CHAIR—We find that it is not part of Australia.

Mr QUICK—Yes, the other states and territories, it is not an issue, but in Queensland it is.

CHAIR—It is now; it was not before. It was not for 30 years, but it has become so since Mr Reynolds decreed it in December 2004.

Mr Pedersen—I suspect it has something to do with some obsessive interpretation of the privacy laws and legislation.

CHAIR—No, it is the adoption legislation we heard; it was the minister's decision.

Mr Pedersen—I am not aware that it is actually couched in the legislation, the current legislation.

Mrs IRWIN—Are you a part of the ministerial task force or involved in any capacity advising the minister on legislation? I know you are only here today as a private citizen.

Mr Pedersen—Yes, I am an invited member of his ministerial advisory forum.

Mrs IRWIN—Just out of curiosity, you have two girls. Are you looking at any further adoptions from overseas?

Mr Pedersen—No.

Mrs IRWIN—You have two gorgeous little girls that you love dearly.

Mr Pedersen—Yes. A couple of reasons. One is age because you will find this hard to believe but I am over 50 years of age so it is impractical. I also have very strong views about the blending of the families. We thought very long and hard about going through the process once. One of the reasons why we were very dogmatic and stuck to our guns about siblings and the older children was that we did not want to be in the situation of introducing new members to the family at a later stage after we had got the kids settled. That is a personal view but it is a decision we made and I believe it has been a good one for us.

Mrs IRWIN—You stated that you were the first fertile couple in Queensland to adopt overseas. Have there been any other fertile couples since that have been—

Mr Pedersen—I believe there is one couple who are going through the assessment phase of the process at the moment.

Mrs IRWIN—If you are on an IVF program—I am not 100 per cent sure on this—and you have not completed that, your application will not proceed until that has ceased. Is that the case in Queensland?

Mr Pedersen—I believe that is the same in Queensland. Once again it is knowledge that I am not directly party to because it was not specifically relevant to our circumstances.

Mrs IRWIN—It is for something like this that I would have liked to have the department here, to ask these sorts of questions, because I feel that sometimes when you go through IVF that can take a number of years and all of a sudden you will find that you have not been able to have children and you have to put in your intercountry adoption application. I think that is a bit of discrimination really.

CHAIR—There is a requirement I think that you have to come to terms with not being able to have children and that is a different question from denying yourself that.

Mr Pedersen—I know that in terms of the assessments there is a lot of discussion about the grief phase of not being able to have children. But as far as I am aware, it does not prevent you from applying and going through the process. I do believe however there is a requirement that it cannot be finalised while you still undergoing IVF.

Mrs IRWIN—I find that hard to comprehend that it cannot be finalised because you are going through IVF but if you are a fertile couple it can be finalised.

CHAIR—You must be on contraception or something but we will not go there, Mr Pedersen. Thank you very much for coming in and giving us a different perspective. We are grateful for your time and we hope your two gorgeous girls have a wonderful life ahead of them and that your difficulty over the time of puberty is eased.

[2.05 pm]

WALSH, Mr Gerard, Private capacity

WALSH, Mrs Margaret-Mary, Private capacity

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming and for the submission you sent to us. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mrs Walsh—Madam Chairman and members, the terms of reference of this inquiry state the aim is to better assist Australians who are adopting or have adopted children from overseas. In our opinion the best way to assist everyday Australians is to increase the number of children available for adoption from overseas. In the past year, 307 children were adopted into Australia for a population of 20 million. Looking at the United States, the number of adoptions into the country was 22,000 for a population of 295 million. Those figures transform into one overseas adoption per 65,000 in Australia and one per 13,000 in the United States. This means there is a five times greater chance for a couple to adopt in the United States compared with Australia.

Adopt Help in the United States claim there are no waiting lists, most families adopt in less than one year—a clear reflection of the figures comparing Australia with the United States. We have handouts for you on where we got this information from.

In Queensland there is a huge waiting list of couples seeking to adopt from overseas. In the past three years Queensland has received 101 out of 849 children adopted from overseas—well under what might be expected, as this state has almost one-fifth of the national population. Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria only have adoption agreements with seven of the countries in the top 20 for overseas adoptions in the United States. There are no agreements by these states with Russia or Guatemala, countries which allocate more than 9,000 children annually to United States couples.

Mr Walsh—If I could continue: there is a declining birth rate in Australia, except for a bit of a spurt with the baby bonus and we put to the committee the great benefits of boosting overseas adoption as one way to right the balance. The total fertility rate in Australia is 1.76 children per woman, which is way below the suggestion by Treasurer Peter Costello in the 2004 budget to have one baby for the father, one baby for the mother and one for the country. Former federal Minister for Ageing, Kevin Andrews, is quoted in the *Melbourne Age* on 21 August 2002 as saying that every year we fail to tackle the declining birth rate is a precious year wasted so far as future generations and the economic welfare of the country is concerned. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, in their population projections in 2003, said that the two factors that have the greatest impact on future national population growth are fertility and overseas migration. They state that by 2051 the number of people aged 65 and over in Australia will rise from 13 per cent or thereabouts currently to between 27 and 30 per cent.

CHAIR—We will all probably be part of it. That is the good news.

Mr Walsh—Yes, that is right. One way to redress this balance is by increasing the population in the under 50 age group through births and overseas adoption. An increase in immigration would be across most age groups and would add to the numbers over 65 of age by 2051. So it is much more effective in the long term to increase overseas adoption rather than immigration. Children adopted into Australian based families will have more family and community support than those families migrating from overseas. We are not suggesting that we stop immigration tomorrow, but when you look at 80,000 or thereabouts people who migrate into Australia each year and we are talking 300-odd children coming in for adoption, there is a fair imbalance in the figures.

We recommend to the committee that a more national approach be taken to establish adoption agreements with countries where children are available for adoption overseas. Overseas countries that are battling with poverty and numerous other problems that we are all so aware of would find it much easier than having to negotiate with up to eight states and territories, or at least we could have supplementary negotiations or agreements with them. The available children from these countries can then be distributed evenly between the states, perhaps based on the number of approved couples in each state. Each state should continue to assess the suitability of couples. It may also not be prudent to immediately restart negotiations with every country, because a lot of those countries have many other problems and perhaps if there is an agreement set up with the states they might not want, as of tomorrow, to totally wipe that agreement. But certainly that could apply to all of the new countries we talk about. As you said, Mrs Bishop, there are numbers of available children looking for countries to be adopted into, and Australia is really the lucky country. Rightly or wrongly, we are a bit of a leader when it comes to peacekeeping and a lot of the things that are happening around the world when there are problems. There are problems with adoption and we are bringing in 300 children each year. As I said, we are bringing in 80,300 people but only 300 of them are brought in as adopted children for Australian based families. Thank you for the opportunity to put our point of view to the committee.

CHAIR—Thank you for your opening remarks. The fact that we have a strong migration policy gives our country two benefits. Firstly, it means our population will continue to grow; and, secondly, we have the distinct advantage of having people who have acquired their skills already bringing them into the country and we are the beneficiaries. With regard to the adoption and the difficult question we are looking at now, aside from the blockages that might exist in the bureaucracy here or whatever the attitudes are, there is also the question that the countries that are relinquishing children determine how many will be relinquished. So it is not up to us to say that we will go out and take; we have to have an agreement with that country, a bilateral agreement, and then that country determines whether or not they will allocate children to this country. I appreciate the remarks you make with regard to a more national approach and that certainly is a most relevant point to make when we talk about having bilateral agreements. Certainly we have heard criticism and testimony from other witnesses that there is a need for new bilaterals to be opened up.

One of the problems is that we have a policy that says we only wish to have new programs with countries that have ratified the Hague convention. The Hague convention puts a great deal of onus on the country which is relinquishing children in terms of financial obligations for things they have to do, so many of the countries where there are children who you might describe as being available have not ratified, nor are they likely to ratify. We are in the position where the

question is: is it in this country's interest to look at countries which are further outside the Hague, as are countries from which we take most of our children—China, North Korea, Thailand? India has now ratified. The Philippines has ratified. So we have all those questions that are in the mix as well. What we are looking at and trying to find is the way that we can make it easier for people who have adopted or rather who wish to adopt and to give an opportunity to someone from another country to come up, as you said, in this wonderful country. So we have a big mix of problems to look at in that. Are you adopting parents?

Mr Walsh—We are on the list.

Mrs IRWIN—Please tell us your story.

CHAIR—We would love to hear it.

Mrs IRWIN—Please tell us what you are going through.

Mrs Walsh—For medical reasons, I was not able to proceed with the IVF program. When we were going through that turmoil we heard about the opening of the expressions of interest and yes, we were a couple that thought this might be our only opportunity; we do not know when they are going to open again. So Gerard and I sat down and filled in the very detailed forms and put our expressions in; they closed on 8 November last year.

Mr QUICK—Did you get a number?

Mrs Walsh—No, and we still have not heard from the department. We got the letter acknowledging receipt of our application, but still we have not heard anything more.

Mrs IRWIN—So you have not been asked to establish eligibility?

Mrs Walsh—No.

Mrs IRWIN—Or attend education sessions?

Mrs Walsh—No. The way we are finding out is through the adoption society. This magazine that the previous gentleman was from—that is how we are finding out what is happening in the department. We have also approached them by phone. We have sent them a letter, but we never got a response to that. Then last month I personally went to the department and said, 'What's happening?' and I was told that they have now caught up with about 260 couples and they are going through the process of the education seminars and the expressions of interest, the qualifications, and there may be the next call up in September—'So you may be called up then.' In the meantime we are trying to obtain knowledge and be aware of what is happening with adoption and talking to couples from the Toowoomba group and another group.

CHAIR—Are they giving you good support?

Mrs Walsh—Yes, they are, very much so. They have told us the procedure and they have said to keep going with it.

Mrs IRWIN—Have you decided what country you would like to adopt a child from?

Mrs Walsh—Because of our ages, we are on the maximum side. I am 47 and Gerard is 51.

CHAIR—The prime of life.

Mrs Walsh—We feel we are. We feel we are younger than our age and we feel that we can offer a sibling group a home, a very loving home. But with the criteria in the countries that we have the agreements for, there are questions. We are looking at China, Ethiopia and the Philippines. With each of those, the department might say that we are too old or that we are on the verge. The maximum age for the Philippines is 47 and if you are older than that they work out that you are going for an older child. Does that make sense?

CHAIR—Yes, it does.

Mrs Walsh—That is what we are going through.

CHAIR—Would you do that?

Mrs Walsh—Yes, we would take older children.

Mr QUICK—One would assume that if you worked in the department you would categorise people by their ages because that predetermines a whole range of other subsequent decisions. With people like you, because of the huge waiting list, people are talking about four and five years—

Mrs Walsh—We are on the outer.

Mr QUICK—Yes. One would assume that you would have priority in lots of regards because the age limit will fall down—

Mrs Walsh—It cuts off.

Mr QUICK—And other couples in their twenties or thirties who, for whatever reason, panicked and put their name on the list have the capacity, because of their youth, to go through the system. Does the department have those sorts of ideas in their head? Have people told you that there is that sort of grouping of people because of age?

Mrs Walsh—We have not been officially told.

Mr Walsh—I think one of the problems for us is that they talk about the groups that they are looking at culturally, then they talk about second timers, then they say ‘and some people from two other groups’. A wording that says ‘some people from two other groups’ tends to indicate that there are not too many in those two other groups. Those other groups are those with past experience with children, which is a little bit like saying perhaps we should go and work in education or child care and first timers. So first timers, in the department’s own writing, come fourth. When you are at our ages, it is a real worry. I did ring the department—Marg has rung them as well and been to see them—and I talked about the countries that we are looking at and

they said, 'Oh, but going on your ages, even if you got children, five or six, and it will take 12 months to get through the process and for 12 months your file will be in the Philippines'—and this and that—'and you'll be too old.' So we have been told that we are probably going to be too old for the Philippines, but we have not had an opportunity, in eight months, to put forward our case. So we are getting too old while our file is waiting for something to happen to it.

Mrs IRWIN—And you have no indication whether it is going to be another six months, 12 months or whatever?

Mrs Walsh—No idea at all.

Mrs IRWIN—That can be very frustrating.

CHAIR—Have you thought about moving?

Mrs Walsh—We could transfer from Warwick, just over the border, to New South Wales, but then there is a higher waiting list there too.

Mr Walsh—In New South Wales it is worse.

CHAIR—Canberra seems better.

Mr Walsh—Canberra or Tasmania.

Mr QUICK—Yes, I would welcome you in my state.

Mrs Walsh—Thank you, Sir.

Mrs IRWIN—On page 2 of your submission to the inquiry, you have stated some figures for the number of children that Queensland was allocated—in 2001-02 you state there were 23 out of 279 allocations; 2002-03, Queensland's share was 29 out of 263. What would you see as a fair share for Queensland?

Mr Walsh—There should not be any reason that Queensland would not have the percentage that we are of the national population. Why should Queensland have any less than any other state? That is not because people are not applying. There are 583 who applied and there are still 100 in the system. Even though the numbers are up to 49 in the past 12 months, there is no reason that Queensland should not get our fair share. I do not say that some of the problem for that perhaps is Queensland. We are coming from a very low base. We had eight per cent and 11 per cent for 20 per cent of the population and now this year the last figures were up to 16 per cent. Our waiting lists should by definition be longer than some of the other states simply because we are coming from a low base. Why should Queensland be any lower than the other states or territories?

Mrs IRWIN—So you just want a bit of fairness in the states and territories.

Mr QUICK—Have you accessed the various state web sites to see which state is doing what and how many are allocated? Where did you get your information from?

Mr Walsh—The figures that we have found are like the chances. We have talked about the chances of getting children. It is like one out of 12,000 in Tasmania, so we had better go down and join you, Mr Quick. In South Australia and Tasmania it is one in 21,000 or 22,000; in Queensland it is one in 79,000; in New South Wales it is one in 100,000. There are massive differences between the states.

CHAIR—I do not think you can compare them on the raw figures. I think you have to look at the individual allocations from the different countries and see whether or not there was a fair allocation of those numbers. Having done that on certain countries, it does not seem to be a fair allocation.

Mr Walsh—For example, in 2001-02 and 2002-03 Queensland had one child from China out of 85 in Australia. We had one child from the Philippines out of 30. They are the Queensland department's own figures, so certainly with those two countries—

CHAIR—We have also had evidence that their figures may not be quite accurate.

Mr Walsh—We can only go on the figures that we have been given.

CHAIR—Yes, that is where we started too.

Mr Walsh—Those are the ones that we were given at one of the expression of interest seminars we went to—this yellow sheet.

CHAIR—We got that too.

Mrs IRWIN—But we are still digging.

Mr QUICK—That is why we are disappointed that the state government and the state minister did not come to the committee. I do not know whether he and the department were apprehensive about what questions might be asked and, being a federal parliamentary committee, we could require him to provide us with information, and that might be a bit sensitive. It is a disappointment. We got a submission of about 100 pages, but we have not been able to ask him or the department any questions, which seems a bit senseless.

Mrs Walsh—As we informed you, we have not got anything from them. We know some of the numbers from the adoption group, and then you have people in different country groups. We were still approaching them last night, but they could not even give us definite figures on how many there were within Queensland and how many there were in Australia.

Mrs IRWIN—But you did get an acknowledgment, I hope, of your application?

Mrs Walsh—Just an acknowledgment; that was it.

Mr Walsh—I think earlier someone talked about South Africa. One of the states is trying to negotiate an agreement with South Africa. In some correspondence that we have seen under the minister's name, Queensland is trying to set up agreements with South Africa and Chile. Different states are trying to set up agreements with different places, and for these countries that

are really struggling with so many issues—humanitarian issues—it is just so difficult. In Australia the states could get together and form a body or a semi-government body or whatever that can negotiate—

CHAIR—No, only nations can negotiate with nations. There is a memorandum of understanding between the Commonwealth and state governments whereby the state governments are given lead state status for developing a program or for administering a program with a country such as China, where the agreement is between Australia and China but Victoria has the lead state status for managing that relationship. As I said, it is a bit higgledy- piggedly.

Mrs Walsh—Have you come across how much, say, Victoria is in communication with China?

CHAIR—Yes.

Mrs Walsh—I think what we are trying to get at as well is how we can improve our relationship with these countries when we only have small numbers. The greatest number of children going to the US, as you can see, come from China. It seems overwhelming that if you want a child from China in the US, it will only take up to a year.

CHAIR—They too have a federal system. But, for instance, Korea only deals with the United States and Australia, and they are the people who say how many may go: ‘Please send us so many files.’

Mrs Walsh—I believe Thailand have opened their files up to double the amount, and that is about 12 from Australia. That has only been in for the last couple of months.

Mr Walsh—I have an article from Signposts to Asia and the Pacific, written by Vivien Altman, who has worked for SBS. We found it on the internet and it is backdated to 1996. This is what was said at that time:

With the imminent ratification of the Hague Convention by the Australian government, there are significant changes going on with agreements being drawn up by the State Welfare Ministers and the Federal Attorney Generals Department. The Federal Attorney Generals will become the central authority through which all inter-country adoption will be negotiated with the Family Court playing a key role.

That article tended to indicate that things were going to be done on a more national basis.

CHAIR—We ratified in 1998 and the Attorney-General then negotiated with the states and the result was a memorandum of understanding. The memorandum of understanding was basically how they operate. To say it is a fairly loose agreement would be putting it mildly.

Mr Walsh—It would be fair to say that there would not be too many tax cuts or we would be a very poor country if our trade was not organised a little better than some of the agreements with overseas countries when it comes to this area.

Mr QUICK—I tend to agree.

Mrs IRWIN—I think I would second that.

Mr QUICK—That is not being partisan at all. I just think as a Commonwealth we have abrogated our responsibility to the states and the states have been absolutely hopeless, looking after their own particular interests and political decision making. Even though there are Labor governments in every state and territory, I am embarrassed by some of the decisions that they have made in this regard. They have failed I think a large number of people who have the best interests of the children at heart. As politicians that is one of the first phrases that drops from our lips and I think we are doing a disservice to you people and others who are putting in the hard yards. I agree: 12 months you could live with. But four and five years and not knowing for two or three years where you are in the great scheme of things is absolutely hopeless.

Mr Walsh—The minister in one of these IAFQ reports basically said 95 per cent of the couples will be deemed eligible. There are 583 in Queensland and that means 560-odd, or whatever it is, will be eligible. So it is not a case of all these terrible people; 95 per cent of them, in his own words, are eligible and are willing and hopefully ready to adopt children from overseas.

CHAIR—You need to ask yourself how is he going to pick the ones. That is the problem.

Mrs IRWIN—I think we heard yesterday that those numbers have actually scaled down a lot. People have withdrawn their applications. Some people have been fortunate enough to fall pregnant through IVF.

Mrs Walsh—Yes. We have friends of ours and that is what has happened. They started the process and thought, ‘No, this is going too fast.’ So they postponed. They notified the department and went back on the IVF and fell pregnant.

Mrs IRWIN—It would be interesting to find out the exact figure now.

Mrs Walsh—According to this—

Mrs IRWIN—Two hundred and something, is it?

Mrs Walsh—They are saying that they have the paperwork from about 110 couples so far.

CHAIR—Yes. They asked 230—I think it was—to establish eligibility, and about half came back.

Mrs Walsh—One hundred and ten still have not.

CHAIR—But there are another 300 out there. We do not know where they are.

Mrs Walsh—That is us.

CHAIR—That is you.

Mr QUICK—Mr Walsh, it might be a good idea for us to be revolutionary and for there to be an assumption that all people who applied were eligible and then could move into education and the onus would then be on the department to prove they were ineligible. That might change the whole mind-set within the department.

Mrs Walsh—What I have heard from couples in Toowoomba and Warwick is that they can stretch out the procedures and it depends on your social worker. Your social worker might only have three visits with you, while some couples had six. Then they have three months to fill in their reports. Some couples got through pretty quickly because the social worker got straight on to it. Others found that their social worker took three months. This then spreads it out further as well. Apparently there are insufficient social workers.

Mr QUICK—One wonders what happens to all the social worker reports and the workbooks that are done by the hundreds and hundreds of families. They must be still in the archives somewhere gathering dust like something out of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

CHAIR—Is there anything else you would like to add?

Mr Walsh—As we said at the start, we are the lucky country. There must be some way that the states and territories and the Commonwealth can work together better to ensure that we do a better job of offering homes to many homeless children around the world. One comment I would make is that each year 5,000 children come to the United States from Russia. The 1980 Olympics in Moscow were boycotted by America, and in 1984 the Olympics in Los Angeles were boycotted by Russia. Therefore, if those two countries can get together and come up with an agreement, surely we in Australia, the lucky country—working in a humanitarian way, as we do in so many other areas—should be able to help those children while looking after the needs of some of our own citizens.

People in Australia who want to adopt children might represent 0.02 per cent of the population. Whatever it is, we are not a big group but, with our many families, we have a lot of support. We are a group of the population and, as a country and as a community, we should be looking more at both the families here who want to have a complete family and the children overseas who want to be part of a complete family. We hope that you can work through these issues and come up with something that makes it better for everyone and for the country.

Mrs IRWIN—We are looking forward to working on our recommendations and I am sure that you will be looking forward to seeing them when the chair tables them in the federal parliament. I can see the point that you are making. I think you just want a bit of fairness—not only for Queensland but for every state and territory. I suppose we could look at having a national database or additional negotiations with countries overseas to allow more children to come to loving families in Australia.

CHAIR—Russia certainly is an interesting case. I am not sure what we do about the policy that says we only wish to have agreements with countries that have ratified the Hague convention, because Russia is not one of those countries. That is an interesting question.

Mrs Walsh—Did I see somewhere that there are about 60-odd countries under the Hague convention?

CHAIR—Sixty-two countries have signed the convention, but only 47 have ratified it.

Mr Walsh—But, if it is all right for George, isn't it all right for Australia?

CHAIR—I might add that the United States has not ratified it either.

Mr Walsh—But they still let 5,000 children from Russia come into the United States each year.

CHAIR—That is the point. Neither of those two countries has ratified the convention.

Mr QUICK—I move:

That the web pages 'Immigrant Visas Issued to Orphans Coming to the USA' and 'Adopt Help' be admitted as exhibits.

CHAIR—Thank you both very much. We appreciate your coming and we hope you move through the process.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Irwin**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 2.38 pm