

I have been in the lucky position to be able to say that intercountry has been a large part of my life since 1978. I have two adopted sisters from The Republic of South Korea ('X' 24, 'Y' 32). I have an adopted brother from Brazil ('Z' is 26). My parents helped facilitate 60 adoptions from Brazil to Australia in the 1980's and 1990s. My husband and I have been in the adoption process for almost three years and we are expecting (hoping)...to receive our adoption referral in the next three weeks.

I must admit that I have been a bit concerned about what I want to say and more importantly, how to say it. I have seen DOCS at work in my family and in the lives of other families for the past 27 years. I have witnessed first hand how the nuts and bolts of the system here in NSW works and what occurs when some of those nuts and bolts fall off. I can also see how much the system has changed in some aspects and in others, not move at all.

I do think that at this time the Department and parents have the unique opportunity to work together to move ahead and be a part of an adoption system that could very well be a model for other countries around the world.

I am a great believer in government to government adoption, and in fact I do believe that the best solution for us here in Australia is a unified adoption process across the country, managed and run by the Federal Government. Agency adoption has its appeal, and has been something that I have thought about myself, but there is a danger with agency adoption that hangs a cloud over the entire adoption process. Baby buying is an ugly occurrence that is fuelled by money from countries without government regulation. I am hard pressed to see how this benefits the community at large let alone the children, biological parents, parents, anyone caught up in a vortex of stolen babies.

In saying that, the government system here in NSW needs to undergo some fundamental changes to ensure a better running intercountry adoption programme. A programme that continues to grow. Despite any difficulties faced.

In the 27 years that I have been involved in adoption, and up to this present day, it still amazes me that the intercountry adoptions branch has senior staff who do not believe in intercountry adoption. I was at a China adoption information day held by the parent group ASIAC in March, 2004. A senior case worker stood up in front of about 150 people and said that, as far as they were concerned, they didn't believe in intercountry adoption and if they had their way, we (as in all the couples present), would be fostering children. That was their opening statement before giving information on the adoption programme itself.

I believe that everyone here today will be unanimous in their belief that the best checking and thorough procedure needs to be implemented to ensure that the best decision for a child is being made. Both government and parents are in total agreement. But how can this be facilitated in a fair, bipartisan manner by senior members of DOCS' staff who

have a fundamental disagreement with the very process they serve. This belief colours every response, every action they take and despite the professionalism of their work practice, I am afraid that the process is designed to discourage, not encourage. There have been efforts made to address this and the seminars given by the Department are excellent, but there still is a long way to go. I would also like to add that the clerical staff in the branch handle a very difficult job very well and are excellent.

DOCS, and the Federal government have a huge resource at their finger tips that could prove to be very useful to everyone involved in the process. Within the adoption community, there are a small number of very informed parents, who in a lot of instances, are better informed than DOCS itself. DOCS has been suspicious these groups for some time. Within the culture of silence that exists in the process, couples and singles in the system hungry for news have no choice but to ask for advice in other arenas. The major source of frustration for adoptive parents is the complete and utter sense of helplessness and lack of information that the process brings. DOCS has complained about the amount of enquiries that they have regarding various cases, yet the more avoidance and lack of news, the more anxious the prospective adoptive parent becomes.

Adoption facilitators from within the parent communities could really serve as a resource for DOCS and for any other body that may take its place.

It is vital to the process that DOCS gives accurate information, especially regarding fees and Immigration procedure. This has not been done, and I know of couples who have had unnecessary delays and stress due to a lack of communication, as well as issues with another departments due to incorrect information.

I do have to ask the question, if Western Australia can provide accurate information in a positive manner then why can't Docs? I refer to the document "China Adoption Information Guide" from the <http://community.wa.gov.au/Resources/Adoption/> website. This document is thorough, couched in understandable language that is regularly updated. It is 55 pages long and covers all aspects of the process for China as well as listing all fees and Immigration requirements. The document available for those of us here in NSW can be found at <http://www.community.nsw.gov.au/documents/adoption/china.pdf>

It is two pages long.

I do believe that this may have a lot to do with funding issues and staffing levels. It seems ludicrous in a department swamped with work, and pushed to breaking point, that most of the case workers would be hired on a part time basis. This has been the case for many years. For the system to move smoothly, it requires full time hands on staff dedicated to the system they serve. This can't be done if there is not adequate funding to ensure the day to day operation of the Branch. In the face of the increased fees now required of adoptive parents, there is no excuse for those funds to be funnelled into State works. The State government has woefully under-resourced this branch as long as I can remember, and this must stop before morale in the Branch reaches rock bottom and the

wheels of the wagon well and truly fall off. I for one do not want to see the sorry state of affairs that exists in Queensland take root here in NSW.

The Adoption seminars here in NSW are run by two wonderful women who are truly devoted to their jobs as social workers and who represent everything the Department should be and needs to be. But their enthusiasm and passion for their roles are not matched by the ethos of the Branch. To be brutally honest, I feel aggrieved that this process has been harder than it needs to be. Coming out of the seminar, I thought things had well and truly changed and I was excited. That soon changed as we became more immersed in the process only to find that the old problems were still in place. Brent and I have had first hand experience of misinformation leading to delays and extreme frustration.

Staff with no time for their own work will not have time to answer questions from anxious parents in waiting, nor will they have the time to update and maintain information for documents needed. This is something that could be expertly handled by a group of adoption facilitators from within the parent community, all working within the parameters of the volunteer system that already exists within the public service. A weekly or fortnightly meeting between DOCS and the facilitators could provide an important link between the Branch and the community, allow an exchange of information and free up the staff of the Branch to do the work they need to do.

Despite the frustrations and the delays and the lack of information and the obstacles faced, we knew that there is a reason we are adopting. My sisters X and Y are walking, talking examples of why we want to adopt. They are wonderful girls who are wonderful members of the community. They contribute to the society, have coped with adversity in their lives that they have faced with strength of character that is astounding and both have an enormous capacity to love.

I have also seen the negative face of adoption with my brother. His adoption has not been successful, and we all have been through a great deal of heartache over the years. Yet the rewards have outweighed the terrible sadness. I can say with absolute conviction that these children would not have been better off in their countries of origin, despite any sadness they may have faced growing up. They were not robbed of culture. An institution does not constitute culture, and with our Chinese child, he or she would face expulsion from the institution at 12 to be sent to work in a factory somewhere in China. Of the nearly 1 million children abandoned in China every year 10 to 15 thousand children are adopted internationally. This is not a perfect world and there are millions of children who will grow up to face uncertain futures and immeasurable hardships, alone and abandoned. There are thousands of childless couples who will face a future of childlessness themselves. But those of us who chose to build our families this way, through intercountry adoption, do so in the face of huge odds.

Despite the frustration and difficulties for all of us who adopt, and for DOCS as well, I do believe that we can move forward together. We can work together to build a process that can benefit the very person all of us discuss at length, our adopted child.

In the light of a drastically falling birthrate, the Federal Government has gone to great lengths to encourage people to have children. It has been great to have the baby bonus granted to those of us who adopt, but it had to be fought for. There are many couples and individuals who find themselves unable to have children, and choose to adopt. The Federal Government needs to go to further lengths to recognise these families and the place that they hold in their respective communities. I would like to thank the committee for listening to those of us in the process and it is great to think that there will finally be moves towards improving the process and the profile of adoption in this country.

The interest in intercountry adoption is on the increase. Better information, positive reportage in the press as well as a vibrant multicultural country have seen intercountry adoption become a valid choice for individuals and couples unable to have children biologically. I do believe that thinking beyond current methods and decades old thought processes, dedicated adoptive parents in cooperation with DOCS or whatever body is facilitating adoptions, can build a model of that will be a blueprint for other countries. It would be great to think that not only will Australia be known as the Lucky Country, but also as a builder of families.