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Monday, 11 April 2005

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

The Secretary,
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services

Dear Sir/Madam

Thankyou for allowing me to provide my opinion on this important issue.

To give you some background to our situation, we are both 37 years old and have been trying to have a family for 7.5 years. We both have fertility problems; we have endured 4 miscarriages, then 4 years of unsuccessful and heartbreaking IVF/fertility treatments. We applied through NSW Department of Community Services (DoC's) three years ago to adopt. After 18 months of application/approval process, we were approved by DoCs to be eligible to adopt a sibling group of 2 children, or a single child, from Ethiopia. Our file waited for 9 months in a queue of files in NSW waiting to be sent to Ethiopia for 'allocation' of our child/ren. The whole adoption process will take between 3 and 4 plus years. We are still waiting eagerly to meet our children, and become a family.

The actual total adoption costs will be about \$25,000 to \$30,000. If we were allocated a single child we would like to be able to adopt another child in the future, and will face a similar wait and increased costs for the second adoption. While we recognise it is our choice to have children the only avenue available to us now is adoption. We did consider local adoption, however there are only a small number of children available (approximately 20 per year in NSW) and there is a large number of applicants and no guarantee of being allocated a child locally. This is the reason we applied for Intercountry Adoption.

With the declining birth rate in Australia, the Government should be encouraging intercountry adoption as a way of forming families. Adoptive families like the rest of the population work and pay taxes and should be eligible for the same services and benefits as biological families. These children adopted from

overseas will become valued members of our society and will be taxpayers and working Australians in the future.

Inconsistencies between state and territory approval processes for overseas adoptions

1. **Costs**-NSW has the highest fees for assessment and processing of files - \$9,700. This increased in 2004 in order to "recover" the costs associated with Intercountry Adoption. These increased fees are not charged for local adoptions. The shift to full cost recovery was promised to provide a more efficient service and streamlined process, which was long overdue. It is not yet clear if this has been achieved.
2. **Waiting Times**- NSW along with QLD has the longest waiting and processing times. We waited 2.5 years just for our file to leave Australia. Applicants in smaller states such as ACT, SA, TAS, NT, would have had their children home with them in this time frame. This is very unfair. The long waiting times make it more difficult to adopt again as it means adoptive applicants have been 'aged out' while waiting for their file to be processed. For example, for the Ethiopian program, there must be no more than 40 years age difference between parent and child. Our total waiting time will be 3.5 to 4.5 years!
3. **Adoption Criteria**- States have varied criteria that applicants must meet to be eligible to adopt. The criteria should be the same regardless of what state an adoptive parent lives. Eg age of parents, marital status, length of marriage, number and age of existing children, applicant's health, weight and earnings varies from state to state.

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.

1. **Tax deductibility** - Adoption costs need to be tax deductible. Parents who give birth to biological children or who undergo expensive IVF treatments are able to claim out of pocket medical expenses when they spend over \$1,500 per year
2. **Government Subsidised** - Infertile couples can undergo an unlimited number of IVF cycles, which are subsidised by Medicare (more often than not the IVF cycles are unsuccessful). The medical assessments required by DoCs are not even subsidised by Medicare.

If the Government is looking to increase the birth rate Intercountry Adoption is a more reliable method than IVF. With IVF there is no guarantee of having a child, whereas after the adoption application/approval process the chance of having a child at the end of the process is more certain.

The Government highly subsidises biological families through antenatal, obstetric, hospital costs and postnatal care. Why doesn't the government subsidise adoption costs?

3. **Government Processing Charges**- Adoptive parents are charged fees by state governments to be assessed as suitable parents. No such approval or fee is needed for biological parents

Adoptive parents have to pay an immigration fee of \$1245 for adopted children. Why are orphaned children not able to enter Australia under Humanitarian Visa that attracts no fees?

4. **Adoption Leave** - Introduction of paid and unpaid adoption leave equivalent to maternity leave irrespective of the age of the child when arriving in an Australian family.

DoCs also require that one parent stay at home for 6 months. This effectively is another cost to adoptive parents as family income is reduced. While we have no problem with this, no such requirement is placed on biological families.

5. **\$3000 Baby Bonus** – Currently this maternity payment is only available to adoptive parents of children who are aged less than 6 months. The majority of children adopted from overseas are aged over 6 months when the child joins their Australian family. This age limit needs to be removed so that adoptive parents are eligible for the maternity payment regardless of the age of the adopted child
6. **Immunisation Allowance** – Needs modification of so adoptive parents are eligible for the allowance if their adopted children are immunised within 18 months of arrival in Australia.

The number of adopted children arriving in Australia from overseas has been diminishing over the years. One must ask the question: Why is it that the number of intercountry adoptions to the United States and other development countries is increasing? The United States and Canadian Governments, actually

offer financial assistance for all adoptions. Not only are their costs lower, but also their waiting times to allocation are much quicker and their service more efficient.

The Australian Government should be supporting and encouraging adoptive parents who in most cases are more committed to extending their families than biological families. Adoptive families have so many more hurdles to overcome than biological families.

Adoption is supposed to focus on providing families for children who need them. Placing barriers in front of families who would be excellent parents for children in need and excluding families from applying due to high costs and long wait times is unconscionable from a Government who supposedly has the needs of children as paramount.

We cannot understand why adoptive families are not as supported as other families in our society. We hope our opinions, experiences and comments have been helpful.

Yours faithfully

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