

Adoption policy and practice in New Zealand

I recently toured New Zealand and presented seminars to members of the public, many of whom had had personal experience of adoption and to social workers, counsellors and other professionals. In some of the seminars we discussed the differences in policy and practice between what is currently happening with adoptions in New Zealand and what is happening in Australia. Of course, I am not aware of current policy and practice in every state and territory in Australia, but I was able to explain what is happening in South Australia where I live. I believe that South Australia is fairly representative.

Adoption has traditionally been a more likely outcome in New Zealand than in Australia. Since the mid 1960s, for example, there have been approximately 100,000 adoptions in Australia, compared to approximately 60,000 in New Zealand, a country with a population of only a fifth that of Australia. Numbers of adoptions in New Zealand continue to be much higher than in Australia and many of the people I met on my tour expressed how alarmed they are at the continuing high numbers of adoptions taking place there.

Many New Zealanders were surprised and delighted to hear that there are so few domestic adoptions taking place in Australia now. Last year in South Australia, for example, there were only five locally-born children adopted. In Western Australia there were only three, although in Western Australia there were also a small number of step-parent adoptions and adoptions of adults, which do not happen in South Australia. New Zealanders were very interested to hear how we in Australia had managed to reduce the number of adoptions of locally-born children to such a low level. This is certainly not the case in New Zealand and there was much discussion about how New Zealand could be persuaded to follow our lead.

In my meetings with social workers in New Zealand, I was horrified to learn that they have a policy of encouraging and arranging meetings between prospective adopters and expectant mothers. I consider this practice to be very dangerous, as there is clearly the danger of the exploitation of the mother - especially a young, unsupported expectant mother, presented with a mature, financially stable couple, eager to take her child. As far as I am aware, this has never happened in Australia and since the *Adoption Act (1988)* was passed, such meetings are illegal in South Australia. Prospective adopters are never contacted in South Australia until after an adoption consent has been signed and the revocation period has expired. I met social workers in New Zealand who admired and envied our policy and practice around supporting expectant mothers and protecting them from exploitation in this way. In this area also, they are hoping that policy-makers in New Zealand can be encouraged to follow Australia's lead.

It was very interesting to tour New Zealand and to learn first-hand how adoptions are managed there. Those whom I met on my tour appreciated the information I was able to provide to them and plan to use that information to improve and update their own policies and practices. Hopefully New Zealanders may find in years to come that, as is currently the case in Australia, the adoption of locally-born children will have become a very rare event.

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