

Intercountry adoption - being part of the solution

Domestic adoption in Australia

The history of domestic adoption in Australia is similar to that in most other English-speaking countries, such as New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom. In the middle of the twentieth century, single parenthood was socially shameful for both parents and children. Vulnerable parents (usually unmarried mothers) were not considered to be competent enough to raise their children, who were transferred to the care of supposedly more competent parents (usually childless, infertile and relatively affluent couples), who had society's approval, because they were married.

Unsupported mothers were rendered powerless owing to the shame and blame inflicted on them by the rigid social expectations of the times. Government financial support was practically non-existent, as was childcare. Adoption was encouraged as being in the best interests of everyone, especially the children. Adoption was about *affluence vs poverty, competence vs incompetence and power vs powerlessness*.

Intercountry adoption in Australia

After the Sole Parent Pension was introduced in Australia by the Federal Government in 1973, numbers of adoptions of Australian born children reduced dramatically. In social welfare terms, this was seen as a positive change. However, it soon became obvious that there was a noticeable increase in the numbers of children being adopted into Australia from other countries. This suggests that intercountry adoption grew to meet an increasing demand for children on behalf of those who wished to adopt.

According to the Hague Convention, intercountry adoption is supposed to be about providing care for children in need. There are, of course, needy children in almost every country in the world. However, children are adopted between poverty-stricken countries and affluent countries, almost exclusively in one direction. On a global scale, it appears that intercountry adoption, in the twenty-first century, is still about *affluence vs poverty, competence vs incompetence and power vs powerlessness*.

Affluence, competence and power

Affluent countries have had the resources and the time to develop the competence to care for children and families in need and to alleviate poverty, to a much greater degree than the countries which are generally described as 'third world'. Countries which are affluent and are considered to be competent are powerful in the global community. Many view intercountry adoption as a hangover from the patronising days of colonialism, which has prevented struggling economies from developing their own internal social welfare programmes, by perpetuating a culture of dependence and helplessness.

Intercountry adoption does not reduce poverty in third world countries, nor increase their confidence in their ability to care for their needy children. Instead of strengthening those countries by sharing our affluence, competence and power with them, we are removing their precious resources, ie their children, which weakens their communities and allows us to bask in our feelings of superiority and benevolence.

Through intercountry adoption, children are being removed from their family, their language, their culture, their community, their homeland and their heritage and scattered throughout the world. This causes pain and suffering to those communities and countries, who are losing their future generations, not to mention the loss and grief experienced by the children

themselves. The lifelong issues for those children are of enormous concern, which will not be addressed here.

Australia gained the admiration and respect of the world by apologising to our Aboriginal people for the removal of children which led to the tragedies of the Stolen Generations. However, our international reputation is now being tarnished, as we are using our affluence, competence and power to exploit third world countries, by removing their children from them. Our government may one day be delivering an apology to the children who have been adopted into Australia from other countries.

Issues for children around the world

Poverty is the greatest single problem affecting children in the world today. Hungry children need food. Sick children need medicine. They do not need adoption. Australia and other affluent countries are in a position to provide social aid to countries struggling with poverty, to support families and communities in need and to provide them with training and expertise to set up government and community-based programmes to provide long term assistance. In this way other countries will be empowered to care for their needy families who encounter poverty and disaster in ways that are culturally appropriate and respectful, instead of having their families and communities fractured.

In some countries adoptions take place, not because of poverty, but because pregnancies occur in socially unacceptable situations. Social attitudes in Australia and other English-speaking countries have changed enormously in the last half-century and they are beginning to change in other countries. Australia can assist in the process of change and cease to collude in supporting conditions of social inequality, by removing these 'inconvenient' children.

Being part of the solution

Australians have for many years contributed to ethical programmes, which support many countries to develop social supports for communities, families and individuals in need. Those who contribute have the satisfaction of knowing that they have helped to educate and empower, to preserve cultural traditions, to encourage equity and dignity and to keep families together. Our government can build on the good work that is being done already and thereby enhance Australia's international reputation. The time has come for Australia to take a stand and set an example to other 'first world' nations. There are many Australians who would like to see immediate plans put in place by Australia to end intercountry adoption. Let us share our ***affluence, competence and power*** for the benefit of children in need around the world. Many Australians would be proud to see Australia become part of the solution, instead of continuing to contribute to the problem.

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