

**Richard Gehrman**

*Richard Gehrman is a Lecturer in the Department of Humanities and international Studies at the University of Southern Queensland, where he teaches international relations and history. His research interests include Australian Indian relations, military history, and intercountry adoption and national identity.*

## **Promoting a Multiracial Australia: Population Policy and Intercountry Adoption**

As the Australian population ages,<sup>1</sup> the Federal government increasingly turns towards a range of options to address the issue. Fear of a revived One Nation means increasing the youthfulness of the population by significantly raising immigration levels will be unlikely. Another option is natural increase, yet the Treasurer's exhortations for parents to 'have one child for Mum, one for Dad and one for the country' are clearly not going to be taken to heart by even the most enthusiastic Costello supporters, unless taxation structures change to support this. The latest idea by an progressively more concerned government involves educating young women at school about the advantages of having children earlier, to avoid the decrease in fertility that comes after 35. Managing the costs for IVF has placed a government ideologically attracted to user pays in a dilemma and the political controversy earlier this year following efforts to reduce government support for IVF shows that it can only be challenged by those comfortable with the prospect of alienating a politically astute lobby group. While IVF will continue to be significant, it is not successful for most who attempt it.

While these discussions continue, Australian statistics for intercountry adoption<sup>2</sup> show decline or stagnation, depending on which state is considered. After a record of 420 intercountry placement adoptions in 1989 – 1990,<sup>3</sup> intercountry adoptions dropped to an

incredible 278 in 2002 - 2003. Although the 2003 – 2004 figures climbed to 369, this is remarkably low considering Australia's population growth. This is even more noteworthy when Australia is compared to the United States. In a similar period, intercountry adoptions increased from 6,536 in 1992 to 18,477 in 2000.<sup>4</sup> Despite claims to the contrary, there is not a shortage of children needing families.<sup>5</sup>

So what has caused so many Australian families to turn away from wishing to adopt overseas? Are we becoming more insular and less open to international influences? Are we less multicultural than the United States? Perhaps the fears of global racial discord or subliminal racism have turned us away from the concept of the multi racial family? Of course, this was not the case. Hundreds of Australians are waiting to adopt from overseas, and thousands more are waiting to be assessed for approval to adopt. Couples seeking to raise a family have not changed but government and societal forces have.

Before examining this decline in intercountry adoption, a recent high profile news story springs to mind. Angelina Jolie, a successful actor who is already parenting a son adopted from Cambodia, adopts a daughter from Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> If Jolie were living in Queensland this would be out of the question as she has not been married for the last three years, but if she lived in New South Wales, she would be allowed to parent. Fortunately for her, she is a United States citizen and subject to their more flexible adoption regulations. Twice divorced, she has presumably faced significant life crises which in Australian terms might in fact make her a much better adoptive parent, depending on how she handled the grief occasioned by marital failure.<sup>7</sup> As the source for information on her adoption is gossip magazines, it is rather hard to separate fact from invention but in the week this story broke, some accounts in Australia presented this as a case of a wealthy first world woman easily acquiring an exotic

accessory, in contrast with the long wait experienced by many ordinary Australians hoping to adopt. Jolie may be affluent and famous but despite her high profile, there seems no apparent reason to doubt that she did not undergo assessment and interviews by social workers as required by American law. Indeed, in her defence it must be stressed that she is already an adoptive parent prior to her more recent adoption, and in all probability has thus demonstrated that she has a solid parenting ability. According to the magazines, both mother and children (and presumed adoptive father-to-be Brad Pitt) are all doing well. The contrast between Australia and the United States could not be more obvious, because while Jolie and her family are doing well, the same cannot be said for the Australian intercountry adoption community.

Jolie is not special because she is wealthy, but because she is American. Throughout the United States her story is newsworthy because she is famous rather than because her adoption was particularly rapid. My sister in law in Cincinnati cannot envisage why an adoption would take more than a year or two at the most. In the United States a longer wait is puzzling.<sup>8</sup> Adoption has long been part of human society<sup>9</sup> yet Australian adoption culture seems to have developed certain national characteristics that make it very different from the American experience. Effective contraception and policies supportive of single parent families in the 1970s and 1980s have seen a dramatic decline in the numbers of local adoptions, and while there has been a small increase in intercountry adoption this has in no way mirrored the significant growth that characterises the American experience. So what is the current system of intercountry adoption in Australia?

### **The Current System of Intercountry Adoption in Australia**

Intercountry adoption in Australia is primarily the responsibility of state governments. The fact that each Australian state controls the selection of adoptive parents creates hardship for those who move interstate during the process, and inconsistencies between the systems creates confusion. Some states require prospective parents to be married for three years, others accept de-facto marriage, while in others single parents can adopt. There are age differences, and procedural differences. Some states allow application at selected intervals throughout the year, others allow applications at any time while in the case of Queensland it is impossible even to apply. After a two and a half year moratorium, in 2004 the state government called for expressions of interest in adoption for an eight week period, and those who were away at the time or who missed the news can only move interstate or overseas if they wish to adopt. Of course under Australian federal law to deliberately travel overseas to procure an adoption is an offence so this is not such a good idea! The differences between bureaucracies mean the chances of a person being able to adopt are radically different, depending on which state they are domiciled in. New South Wales, Australia's most populous state has the lowest number of intercountry adoptions per head of population. If the Australian Capital Territory's much higher intercountry adoption rate of 1 adoption per 12,462 were applied to New South Wales, that state alone would have had 540 intercountry adoptions in 2003 – 2004 rather than 66.<sup>10</sup>

## **A Slow Processes**

Intercountry adoption in Australia is a slow process. While there are differences in each state, the process is particularly slow when compared with America. Adoptive parents and

support groups are resolutely opposed to fast-tracked adoptions, being convinced of the need for parents to be fully aware of the challenges and responsibilities that a multi racial family entails, but the interests of children in care overseas are not served by over-complex bureaucratic processes that frequently oblige the applicants to repeat individual appraisal components such as medical, financial and police assessments. There appears to be little desire by some Australian governments to streamline the process or to significantly increase intercountry adoption by opening adoption agreements throughout Africa or with large countries such as Russia.

The Expression of Interest in Queensland provides an overview of the problem. Over two thousand information packages were given out after September 2004, with the vast majority of couples being discouraged from continuing. Only 587 couples applied, with 204 being invited to establish their eligibility and attend education sessions held in two locations in the State. By February 2005, 93 couples (some of whom had travelled thousands of kilometres) had attended their education sessions.<sup>11</sup> This sounds like a remarkably fast response, and is a highly commendable improvement on past practice with much credit going to Ministers Judy Spence and Mike Reynolds, but the past record in Queensland presents a grim picture. If they process adoptions at the same rate as in the past, it is unlikely they will reduce the backlog. Queensland has processed 564 adoptions over the last 16 years, suggesting that if no new applications were accepted, to process the current applications at the rate followed in the past could take until 2030! Of course dealing with the current applicants will not take so long – if only because many of them - and their potential children - would have been disqualified by age or death.<sup>12</sup> Even forgetting the realities of this fanciful scenario, waiting times of two to four years are not uncommon.

## **Misconceptions Leading to an Anti Adoption Culture**

Rojewski and Rojewski note that despite decades of research there is no empirical evidence that intercountry adoption causes harm to adoptees and that beliefs linking cultural affiliation, national identity and race to the well-being of the individual are erroneous.<sup>13</sup> Yet attendance at any social gathering of any intercountry adoption group in Australia would quickly make the observer aware of the belief that Australia has an anti adoption culture.<sup>14</sup> Anti-adoption practices has been examined in the current House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services enquiry into intercountry adoption, with evidence presented in a public hearing suggesting that some state departmental officials have deliberately worked to establish an anti adoption culture, and that others had publicly humiliated pro-adoption advocates.<sup>15</sup> The reasons for such attitudes are complex, and could come from the guilt of government officials who feel their family care departments have been responsible for past abuses, sublimated racism, inertia or a genuine opposition to intercountry adoption. Ironically, the creation of an anti-adoption culture has led to a situation where educated white middle class public servants work to exclude uneducated, non-white, poor children from arriving here, a bizarre situation in twenty-first century Australia.

Intercountry adoptive parents frequently feel they have to pay for the painful memories and emotional costs experienced by past relinquishing mothers and adoptees, from the time when Australian birth mothers were frequently coerced into surrendering their children.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that children relinquished in the intercountry adoption program are clearly not 'stolen', connections between the Stolen Generation and intercountry adoption continue to be made,<sup>17</sup> with racist world views that focus on a child's pigmentation being the only possible

link. The hardships experienced by child migrants<sup>18</sup> also seems part of this ideological framework that has contributed to the development of an institutional culture that regards non-biological parenting with suspicion. State bureaucracies, themselves the institutional descendents of authorities whose neglect allowed the abuses in the past became the ‘born again’ guardians of a moral culture of adoption where the mantra ‘in the best interests of the child’ could be patronisingly regurgitated by public servants who had the power to quell dissent and sidestep questions. Most applicants are cautious about challenging officials who have the power to deny them a family, or to delay their application. Officials make the rules and are reluctant to respond to calls to establish programs with new countries.

### **Punitive Financial Costs and the Adoption Triangle**

Intercountry adoption can easily cost \$30,000 which is significant enough to deter all but the most committed. The amount required by state governments once again varies, with the new user pays model of New South Wales requiring applicants to contribute \$9,700 for their assessment of eligibility to adopt. Queensland’s \$2,053 is modest, as is Western Australia’s \$2,246, but these are the exception in a system where average processing fees are close to \$6,000. When Federal visa application fees of \$1245 per child are added, along with hotel costs, medicals, airfares, orphanage support, translation and court document fees overseas, adoption is not an easy option. One state authority estimates the overall cost for the five most popular overseas programs to range from \$10,000 for the Philippines and Thailand, \$20,000 for Ethiopia, \$20,000 to \$23,000 for South Korea and \$20,000 - \$30,000 for China.<sup>19</sup>

The adoption triangle is a key component of intercountry adoption. In contrast to the two dimensional nature of biological parenting, the relationship is three sided. In the triangle, the birth parents are recognised and rightly privileged by processes that encourage adoptive parents to value and respect the traditions and the cultural heritage of the child. Today most adoptive parents embrace this with enthusiasm, as research has shown this is critical for the emotional well being of the child in later years. The phrase ‘you don’t just adopt a child, you also adopt a culture’ reflects the attitudes of thousands of Australians who have made our society richer and more diverse. Many adoptive parents provide financial assistance to impoverished members of the birth family in the country of origin or for siblings who due to their age cannot be adopted.<sup>20</sup>

## **A Proposal for Reforming Intercountry Adoption**

Having examined the system, what could be done to reform it? While adoption services are currently managed by state governments, consideration should be given to accrediting private organizations, to standardising the selection criteria nationwide, and to negotiating agreements with more countries that have children in need who could be placed in Australia. Allowing private providers was advocated in a reform proposal sponsored by the Department of Community Services in New South Wales in 2004,<sup>21</sup> and a well regarded private agency was the basis for the South Australian system until 2005 when the state government took control of the process, allegedly against the recommendations of their own review.<sup>22</sup> On a positive note, the current Federal enquiry chaired by Senator Bronwyn Bishop is considering inconsistencies in Australian adoption regulations.<sup>23</sup>

Intercountry adoption should be streamlined so the current practice which tolerates waiting times of up to five years comes to an end.<sup>24</sup> Slower processes can mean adoptees are older when they arrive in Australia, and this does not enhance their adjustment. While in New South Wales it can take more than 6 months for the approval of an application following the completion of a social worker's assessment,<sup>25</sup> Queensland's new rationalized processes can take less than a month. Overseas procedures will naturally work at the pace of the foreign government concerned, but processes in Australia can be expedited. In the past there have been cases where allocated children have died before their parents could collect them.

A radical rethinking needs to take place to create a public culture that is more accepting of intercountry adoption, and that distinguishes it from earlier unregulated practices. Adoptive parents are not saints but neither are they baby stealers. The Hague Convention on Protection of Children was carefully written to safeguard the rights of the child, and to prevent the procurement of children for adoption. The 1989 United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child emphasises the benefits to a child if they are raised in a family environment. Australian public culture should be changed to recognise the good that adoption can bring, and to reduce the prejudice that adoptive parents can experience. Rather than seeing intercountry adoption as the last option, it should be possible to present it as a respectable and valid alternative to long term institutionalised care in the country of origin. It is not in the best interests of adoptees if they realise in later years that Australia only begrudgingly accepted the legitimacy of their existence.

Increased financial support should be given to intercountry adoptive families to match the support given to parents of Australian born children. Intercountry Adoption support groups were delighted when the 'baby bonus' was extended in early 2005 to cover adopted children

who were under 2 years of age on arrival in Australia. While this is a positive step, the \$3,000 Maternity Payment is a derisory sum when the full cost of adoption is considered. In the United States, government tax exemptions of US\$10,000 are given to adopting families whose annual income falls below US\$75,000. Enacted in conjunction with the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994,<sup>26</sup> this law was designed to encourage the placement of children in a family environment rather than leaving them in institutionalised care.

Most Australian citizens do not have to suffer the intrusion that adoptive parents face, ranging from financial investigation, intrusive questioning and even a pledge to practice contraception. It is desirable that the interests of the child are paramount because the children are so powerless, but what about giving more consideration to the interests of adoptive parents? Their contribution should be valued, recognised and applauded. Post adoption care should be provided to them, and their rights should be given greater consideration. No one wants a return to the 1940s or 1950s when parents were able to select babies from crowded rooms in hospitals, as occurred in Suzanne Chick's story. Rightly, power has been taken away from adoptive parents and the emphasis has been placed on children, but the lack of affirmation given to adoptive parents is unbelievable. Surely parents deserve more consideration, more information and more respect? In an effort to avoid the commodification of children the current system seems designed to replicate the 'surprise' that occurs in birth, but adoption is not as simple as birth; it is a profoundly complex process with many consequences.

## **Conclusion**

In the twentieth century, society thought the adopted child was the lucky one, whereas now adoptive parents proudly assert they are the lucky ones. Adoptive parents accept that their desire to share their whole lives and the lives of their extended families, for better and for worse, with some other small humans who happen to be biologically and ethnically different from them is based on a combination of altruism and self interest. If they did not want to build a multiracial family they would just sponsor a child rather than embarking on a demanding yet rewarding experience. However they do find it emotionally tiring to have to feel that they are incredibly selfish and greedy people just because they want to do this. An opportunity exists for those in public life who wish to increase the number of Australian children to do so by supporting intercountry adoption.

*‘When I sit and think by myself about the fact that I feel Australian and look Colombian, I feel different and proud of both parts of my cultural heritage. Then when I walk down the street and see people from all different cultures – Vietnamese, Greek, Middle Eastern, Anglo, Islander – I realise I am just a small part of the big multicultural picture that has been painted in Australia over many years.’<sup>27</sup>*

Unlike immigration and IVF, there are few of votes in intercountry adoption. But there might be more, if there were more adoptions. Perhaps it would be worth dropping Peter Costello a line. Then again, Tony Abbott might be a better option.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Readers might recall the recent article by van Onselen and Errington on the aging of the Australian population. See Peter van Onselen & Wayne Errington, ‘Solutions and Diversions: The debate on Australia’s ageing population’, *AQ – Journal of Contemporary Analysis*, July – August, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The comments made in relation to the behaviour of state government officials do not relate to current staff of the Intercountry Adoption Unit of the Queensland Department of Child Safety, and is not intended to imply any criticism of them. Any references to adoption refer to intercountry adoption unless local adoption is specified.

<sup>3</sup> Figures taken from Australian Bureau of Statistics and intercountry adoption statistics from the Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, in *Australians Adopting European Children (AAEC)'s Submission to Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas*, 2004, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Dianna Bagnall, "The Adoption Twist", *The Bulletin*, 10 April 2002.

<sup>5</sup> The perception that natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami have left large numbers of parentless children available for intercountry adoption just waiting to be 'saved' is false. The worst thing for disoriented children in a time of crisis would be to send them overseas, and concepts such as 'saving' children are inappropriate. However, throughout the world as a whole there are large numbers of children in need who have been relinquished, but Australian governments have no great incentive to initiate new programs. For a discussion on 'saving' children by adoption see Sarah Armstrong and Petrina Slaytor, *The Colour of Difference: Journeys in Transracial Adoption*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2001, pp. 12-13. Yet there are children seeking families overseas. To take one example, in Ethiopia there have been 900,000 AIDS deaths leaving up to 5 million orphans.

<sup>6</sup> 'Brad and Ange bring their baby home', *Woman's Day*, 1 August, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Dealing with grief and loss is a significant component of pre-adoption education.

<sup>8</sup> As an example, the sentence from an American study of intercountry adoption says 'Jim and Nancy had waited a long time – over eighteen months in fact', Jay Rojewski and Jacy Rojewski, *Intercountry Adoption from China: Examining Cultural heritage and Other Postadoption Issues*, Bergin & Garvey, Westport, Connecticut, 2001, p. 41. In Australia this would be considered an unbelievably rapid adoption.

<sup>9</sup> Audrey Marshall and Margaret McDonald, *The Many Sided Triangle: Adoption in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2001, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Australians Adopting European Children (AAEC)'s Submission*, *op cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Byerley, 'How is the expression of interest going?', *International Adoptive Families of Queensland Magazine*, March 2005, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Many applicants have married late, delayed childbirth, tried IVF and then moved on to adoption. Most states have removed age discrimination in adoption, but most countries that offer children for adoption have age limits. For this reason the age of parents is a significant issue.

<sup>13</sup> Jay Rojewski and Jacy Rojewski, *op. cit.* p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> Dianna Bagnall, *op cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Proof Committee Hansard, House of Representatives Public Hearings and Transcripts, Brisbane, Thursday 21 July, 2005, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> For an excellent example of this practice see Suzanne Chick's *Searching for Charmain*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> This issue is raised by many observers. See for example Anne Suskind, 'Bringing over baby', *The Bulletin*, 2 June 2004, pp. 30-32, and *Australians Adopting European Children (AAEC)'s Submission to Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas*, 2004, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> See Alan Gill, *Orphans of the Empire*, Millenium Books, Sydney, 1997.

<sup>19</sup> These figures were provided by the Queensland Department of Child Safety.

<sup>20</sup> In Australia children must be 5 years old, with occasional exceptions allowed for sibling groups. In the United States much older children are adopted.

<sup>21</sup> *Intercountry Adoptions: A Reform Proposal for NSW*, NSW Department of Community Services, Sydney, April 2004.

<sup>22</sup> 'New adoption rules will cost SA more', 3 February 2005, [http://www.sa.liberal.org.au/news/news\\_item.asp?NewsID=3623](http://www.sa.liberal.org.au/news/news_item.asp?NewsID=3623)

<sup>23</sup> Liz Gooch, 'Inquiry tackles adoption law maze', *The Age*, 20 April 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Farah Faroque, 'A family affair', *The Age*, 17 December 2003.

<sup>25</sup> *Australians Adopting European Children (AAEC)'s Submission to Inquiry into Adoption of Children from Overseas*, 2004, p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> For a further critical discussion of changing trends in the United States see Maureen Ittig, 'A Family Perspective on Transracial Adoption', *The Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars*, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Armstrong & Rose, *op cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> In the well publicised case of Daniel O'Connor, most of the discussions of fatherhood revolved around Tony Abbott, not Daniel's adoptive father of 27 years, John O'Connor.