

Adoption: the long journey home

August 8, 2004

Reporter : [Helen Dalley](#)

Producer : Ann Buchner



At a time when the Federal Government is actively encouraging couples to have children — handing out \$3000 baby bonuses to new mothers, boosting family payments and subsidising expensive infertility treatments like IVF via the Medicare safety net — there seems to be little support for childless couples wishing to create families via inter-country adoption. Treasurer Peter Costello's call to "have one for Mum, one for Dad and one for the country" has a hollow ring for couples desperate to adopt a child from overseas. While it's estimated up to 40,000 children are adopted around the world each year, only 278 were adopted from a limited

number of countries into Australia last year. According to many in the adoption community, a lack of political will by Federal and State governments to make overseas adoptions work is to blame for the small numbers of children coming into Australia. Many adoptive parents who commit to the lengthy and expensive process of inter-country adoption claim the financial, legal and bureaucratic hurdles forced on them by governments shows there's one standard for biological parents, but quite another when it comes to those who want to adopt ...

At a time when the Federal Government is actively encouraging couples to have children - handing out \$3000 baby bonuses to new mothers, boosting family payments and subsidising expensive infertility treatments like IVF via the Medicare Safety Net - there seems to be little support for childless couples wishing to create families via inter-country adoption.

Treasurer Peter Costello's call to "have one for Mum, one for Dad and one for the country" has a hollow ring for couples desperate to adopt a child from overseas. While it's estimated up to 40,000 children are adopted around the world each year, only 278 were adopted from a limited number of countries into Australia last year.

According to many in the adoption community, a lack of political will by Federal and state governments to make overseas adoptions work is to blame for the small numbers of children coming into Australia. Many adoptive parents who commit to the lengthy and expensive process of inter-country adoption claim the financial, legal and bureaucratic hurdles forced on them by governments show there's one standard for biological parents, but quite another when it comes to those who want to adopt.

Ricky Brisson, Executive Officer of Australian Families for Children, told *Sunday*: "My concern is that there are thousands of children waiting for families and our government is lacking any initiative to assist bringing those children here. We spend millions of dollars on foreign aid, we spend millions of dollars on disaster relief and we spend millions of dollars on a range of other international activities yet bringing here another 300 children to Australia, another 500 children, seems to be a major problem."

The Hague Convention of 1998 enshrines the rights adopted children and is also aimed at stamping out international baby trafficking. As a signatory to the Hague Convention, the Australian Federal Government has overall responsibility for managing inter-country adoption, but it has passed on the administrative duty to the various states and territories to manage via their various community service departments.

Would-be adoptive parents now face a raft of different rules, legislations and fee structures depending on where they live. This frequently causes enormous confusion and frustration for couples trying to negotiate their way through the slow, complex and costly adoption process. Ricky Brisson says: "We have seven states with seven different sets of rules and legislation and that is a problem to start off with."

Adopting a child from overseas takes great emotional and financial reserves. In some states, it can take up to four years for couples to work their way through the adoption process and finally bring their much longed-for child home. And inter-country adoption does not come cheap - it can cost anything from \$25,000 to \$45,000 to bring a child back to Australia, depending on the country a child comes from.

While travel expenses, in-country legal costs and donations to the foreign orphanages eats up a large portion of this expense, each state or territory charges application and assessment fees that run into the thousands of dollars - in July this year, NSW raised its inter-country adoption fees from \$2900 to \$9700. As Aileen Berry, adoptive mother of Chinese-born daughter Ella, explained to *Sunday*, such high costs, coupled with no government financial support, make inter-country adoption prohibitively expensive for many couples. "I get no recognition of my adding to the Australian population," she said. "You certainly qualify for certain family tax benefits but the \$3000 baby bonus is not available to people who adopt children over six months. Almost every child who comes from China is over 12 months old."

Currently most children come into Australia from seven countries that have longstanding bilateral agreements with Australia or are signatories to the Hague Convention. The long waiting lists for children from these seven countries would suggest that there are not enough 'adoptable' children to satisfy demand. However, 36 other countries have also signed the Hague Convention but Australian authorities are not making any strong moves to sign bilateral adoption agreements with them, preferring instead to steer prospective parents to the standard, long running adoption programmes that already exist.

This lack of available adoption programmes, coupled with the slow bureaucratic process in many states, means that would-be adoptive parents can languish for years waiting for their file to be sent overseas. This combined with strict age limits set by some Australian states and adoptive countries, mean many couples simply become too old to adopt. "There is nothing I can do about it as far as my age goes," said 47-year-old Keith Barnett. "Why shouldn't it be on your ability rather than your age?"

But for those couples who do successfully work their way through the arduous application and assessment process and are finally able to complete their families with a much longed-for child, all the wait and expense is well worth it.

"It's like a flower," says adoptive mother, Trudi Barnett. "It's just all this potential's just locked away and then you take the child, nurture the child, love the child, the child feels more secure and opens up and everything starts to blossom and just come to life. It's just the most amazing feeling."

[Click here to read a transcript of this story](#)

Sunday also recently ran a two-part story titled 'Missed Conceptions', investigating IVF success rates and how many women were leaving it too late to start families. Read: [part 1](#) | [part 2](#).