

The Market in Children: Stories of Australian Adoption

INTRODUCTION

Adoption is a subject that divides public opinion. People take strong positions that leave no room for debate. Some agree with celebrity Deborra Lee-Furness that adoption is a legitimate way to form a family, and the best way to relieve the sufferings of the more than “100 million orphans in our world”. Others hold that adoption is a crime against mothers and their children that can never be justified.

Fifty years ago the Lee-Furness position was generally accepted within Australian society. Social workers, psychologists, health professionals, ministers of religion, editors of women’s journals, all agreed that adoption was the perfect solution to two social problems. Couples who couldn’t have children could solve their infertility problem by adopting a baby to rear as if it was their own. And young mothers could escape the shame of an illegitimate baby and get on with their lives. Infertile couples strongly supported this way of thinking, and the parents of teenaged mothers tended to agree. Mothers and babies were not consulted; it was assumed that their elders knew best.

Today this position is under challenge. The self-help groups formed in the 1980s and 90s by mothers separated from their children have brought the pain of separation into public view. They have won the ear of politicians. The Prime Minister has apologised on behalf of the nation to parents and children separated by adoption for the pain caused them by past adoption practices. Most of the state parliaments and religious institutions administering adoption have done the same.

The significance of adoption within Australian society has also changed. Fifty years ago adoption was an unspoken secret within many Australian families. Thousands of children, mostly babies, were adopted every year: more than 9,000 in the peak year 1971. In the ten years after 1968 about 68,000 children changed hands. Today the situation is very different. Less than 500 adoptions take place

each year in Australia, in a population which has grown from 13 million people in 1971 to more than 20 million. Adoption is history to most young Australians, history that they do not understand.

The book sets out to tell the history of adoption as it has been experienced by all those involved. You will find here the voices of people separated by adoption, and of those who have chosen to adopt. In telling these stories we consider why people took the decisions that they did—how they understood their situation and how much choice they had.

As historians we also have our own story to tell. It is a story that goes beyond the understanding of particular actors, to look at the forces that have moved them. We find that a market in children has long existed in Australia, shaped by supply and demand: the demand of those seeking to adopt, and the supply of babies available for adoption. Our story turns on the changing interaction of these forces, and the efforts of social workers and politicians to control the market. It is a complicated story, and before immersing the reader in its detail we offer here a survey of its major turning points.

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Adoption in its broadest sense is the transfer of a child from their birth family into the care of another. Adoption in this sense has been practised for as long as people have lived in Australia. Aboriginal families have always taken in children in need of care, and the same can be said about the early years of white settlement. Grandmothers often took in their sons' and daughters' children and raised them, sometimes as their own. In the absence of grandparents, friends and neighbours of needy children often did the same.

The market in children came into play as city populations grew. Here the exchange of children was between strangers. This is first visible in the classified advertisement columns of the metropolitan newspapers. From the 1840s these carried advertisements from people wanting to adopt and from parents unable to keep their children. It was always a buyers' market, with more children available than places for them. "Sellers" often offered a cash payment to cover the costs of the adopting family.

These were private arrangements, not authorised by law. It was not until the 1920s that legislation was passed in all states establishing and regulating adoption as a legal practice. From this time all adoptions had to be registered, giving the adopted child a new legal personality as a member of her adopted family. The exchange of money was made illegal. The introduction of legal adoption dampened but did not eliminate the trade in children.

The acts were intended to encourage adoption by giving new parents security of possession, and preventing contact with the birth family. The response was not great; no more than a few hundred children a year were adopted in each state across the 1930s. Demand for adoptable children took off suddenly during World War II. In 1942 the balance of buyers and sellers advertising in the papers shifted decisively, with more people wanting children than there were children available. Intending parents also wanted more security of possession. State parliaments responded by passing a series of laws which sealed the original birth records and cut off all contact with the birth family.

The adoption laws of the 50s and 60s also reflected the influence of the new profession of social work. Social work and legal adoption practice grew alongside each other. The new adoption laws authorised social workers to decide which couples were fit to adopt, and which babies were fit for adoption. Social workers remember these years as a time when the profession found perfect homes for perfect babies. But in retrospect it is clear that the market was driven by the demands of adopting parents. On the supply side, single mothers came under great pressure to give up their children for adoption.

Adoptions peaked in 1971-72, with 9,798 children adopted across the country. From that peak numbers dropped sharply and suddenly. By 1975 they had fallen to about 5,000 a year. After that the decline slowed, but the total has not topped 1,000 since 1991. This collapse of the domestic market has been caused by a decline in supply; children are no longer readily available for adoption. The rapid decline in the 1970s reflected the fact that women with unwanted pregnancies suddenly had options other than adoption. Contraception and abortion made it easier to escape pregnancy in the first place. Social security benefits were extended to single mothers in 1973, supporting and validating their choice to

keep their children. In the longer timeframe more women were in the workforce, and childcare was becoming cheaper and easier to find. By the 1980s mothers and their grown up children were publicly challenging the worth of adoption, and social workers began assisting young mothers to keep their babies.

Demand from prospective parents has not declined alongside supply; people unable to bear their own children have turned to other ways of making families. In-vitro fertilisation has produced miracle babies for thousands of couples since the 1980s, and disappointed thousands more. A growing market in overseas adoption attracted Australians from the late 1970s, with numbers peaking at about 400 a year in the late 1980s. During the 1990s overseas adoptions equalled and then exceeded the declining totals for the domestic market. Most Australian states amended their laws during this period to open sealed adoption records and to allow contact between the families involved; this move towards open adoption probably also encouraged intending adopters to look overseas.

Now total adoptions have declined to less than 500 a year. About half of these are children adopted from overseas. Approaching a third are “known child” adoptions, by foster-parents, step-parents or other family members. Babies and toddlers born in Australia and adopted by strangers make up less than 10% of all adoptions today. Inter-country adoption is also in decline, with major suppliers withdrawing from the market. Intending parents are turning to a new source of supply—the global surrogacy market. Estimates suggest that in 2011 more than 200 Australians paid to have babies grown in the unregulated Indian market. Adoption as a way of making families seems to have a limited future.