



Speech by

DESLEY SCOTT

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ADOPTION OF CHILDREN AMENDMENT BILL

Mrs DESLEY SCOTT (Woodridge—ALP) (6.17 p.m.): This legislation is vital to bring our state adoption practices into line with today's reality. Back in 1971-72, 1,774 children were relinquished and were placed with adoptive parents. These were the days when a young girl would suddenly disappear from her family for six months and possibly be sent to another town to live with an aunt or uncle until her baby was born to avoid the shame of a pregnancy out of wedlock. Sadly, many of the young mothers who longed to keep their babies were coerced and forced to sign papers assigning their tiny baby to adoptive parents. Without public acceptance and without any income support, many were left with no other option.

All members of this House would be aware of the vast variations in the experience of these adoptions. May I relate the experience of a friend of a friend who had meticulously kept albums of photos and memorabilia awaiting the day that she expected may come when her treasured adopted daughter met her birth mother. She had always told her daughter that her birth mother had loved her, but for some unknown circumstance had felt that she could not provide her with all of her needs. When that birth mother made contact and met her daughter for the first time, she spent tearful hours enjoying and sharing the special times throughout her daughter's young life that she had missed. A wonderful bond has developed between those three women. Sadly, there have been many unfortunate outcomes, with some birth parents or adopted children registering their wish for no contact, and those who do make contact sometimes having a less than pleasant experience.

Our society has changed radically. With emotional, physical and financial support and with many agencies and community organisations to provide assistance, most young women choose to keep their babies. Our society has learnt that children are happiest when raised by loving parents or by one parent, when support services—should that parent need help—are adequate. I commend my three high schools of Woodridge, Mabel Park and Kingston which have all made it possible for young mothers—indeed, they have been encouraged—to continue their education. They have devised programs designed to produce optimum results.

In the year 2000-01, only eight children were available for adoption in Queensland. We must ask ourselves whether it is appropriate to continue taking applications for adoption while the list becomes ever longer and fewer children are available. The focus needs to shift from a chronological order, where once a couple came to the top of the list they were next in line, to seeking the most appropriate match for a child and parents. A relinquishing mother may have many criteria she wishes to see in the adoptive family who will become the parents and care givers to her child. There can be ethnic, religious, educational and possibly even physical characteristics to be considered. It is preferable that those who administer this department are able to concentrate their best efforts on serving the interests of the child. I understand the present system places a great deal of effort into administering waiting lists and assessing parents who, when the length of waiting time is taken into consideration, may never become adoptive parents.

The current act, which requires all applications to be entered on the relevant adoption list, has resulted in an enormous amount of administrative work. I am sure all members will agree that the focus of this department should be towards the best outcome for each child. The present adoption register of 230 couples is sufficient to meet placement needs for the next 15 years. All of these couples will automatically be transferred to either the expressions of interest register or, if they have been assessed, to the general children's adoption list. However, it is possible that within that register there may not be a

perfect match for a child; thus, there will be a call for expressions of interest. I know only too well how the longing for a baby can become an all-consuming focus, particularly for a woman who has longed for a child. The long wait can be frustrating and, to a great degree, can put people's lives on hold. This new legislation is designed to eventually have lists which more closely reflect the availability of children and which only call for expressions of interest when appropriate.

Due to the very long delays in awaiting adoption within Australia, many couples have now registered to adopt a child from an overseas country. The visions on our TV screens of deprived children living in abject poverty in many countries around the world, many of them displaced orphans, have resulted in higher numbers of people deciding to adopt a child from overseas. The latest figures listed for overseas adoptions was 361 couples. This would be sufficient to meet the needs over the next eight years. Once more, when expressions of interest are called for, this waiting time will greatly reduce.

This legislation will require couples to meet more than just the base eligibility requirements. However, if we are to have the most beneficial outcome for the child involved, this is essential. Also, many overseas governments have their own requirements which must be met. It is essential that we assess couples with all of these aspects in mind if we are to see Queensland couples chosen as a match for a child from overseas. These and other measures are designed to deliver transparent and accountable decisions by this government. We should expect nothing less in this very emotive and delicate area which has been responsible for so much hurt, lifelong anxiety and emotional damage in the past. It allows flexibility and it allows the focus to be where it should rightly be: on the child.

I thank the minister, the Hon. Judy Spence, for her sensitivity in dealing with these issues and for having as her top priority to effect the best possible outcome—in this particular case, the welfare of the child. I am grateful to departmental staff for their assistance and briefings and to those who have worked on this legislation. Once again, I am proud to have the opportunity to support a bill which demonstrates our government's commitment to positive social outcomes.
