



Speech by

Jann Stuckey

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

Hansard Wednesday, 14 November 2007

ADOPTION OF CHILDREN AMENDMENT REGULATION (NO. 1) 2007

Mrs STUCKEY (Currumbin—Lib) (7.40 pm): I move—

That the Adoption of Children Amendment Regulation (No. 1) 2007, Subordinate Legislation No. 257 of 2007, tabled in the House on 30 October 2007, be disallowed.

In moving this disallowance motion I put forward the coalition's case on behalf of Queensland's intercountry adoptee network and place on record its absolute fury at the manner in which this government is discriminating against it and blatantly commodifying children. Correspondence has been sent to me from Queenslanders across this great state with stories of intense desire to become a family, the struggles and barriers placed in their paths, the love shared when their quest is completed and their disgust at this government's pointed money grab.

I also make the point that the highly sensitive portfolio of Child Safety has had three ministers in some 14 months. What is the first thing the new minister does? She slugs innocent, well-meaning, often childless parents with grossly unfair fee hikes. Does she call for a CMC review into recent child deaths? No. Will she investigate why children are kept in motel accommodation for up to six months? No. Does she admit that not all 110—

Mrs KEECH: I raise a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The motion that we are debating relates to a regulation regarding adoption fees. It has nothing whatsoever to do with child deaths. It has nothing whatsoever to do with provisions under the Child Protection Act. I seek your ruling on the relevance of the member's speech.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr O'Brien): The member is in order. I call the member for Currumbin.

Mrs STUCKEY: I put on the record that the minister does not admit that not all 110 recommendations—and this regulation is part of this—from the 2004 CMC report have been implemented despite her predecessor misleading parliament saying that they have been. The minister has agreed—

Mrs KEECH: I raise a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The member is being absolutely dishonest in terms of her language. The previous Minister for Child Safety at no time misled parliament. I find those comments offensive and I ask the member to withdraw them.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER: There is no point of order. I call the member for Currumbin.

Mrs STUCKEY: According to many Queenslanders, the minister would rather give a tick to a partial cost recovery policy than face the serious challenges this department faces. Is this cold and heartless behaviour becoming a mark of the Blich government?

In Australia during 2005-06 some 421 intercountry adoptions took place, representing 73 per cent of all adoptions compared to only four per cent in the period 1980-81. Children can be adopted by approved Queensland families either from countries that abide by the Hague convention on the protection and adoption of children which was signed by the federal government in 1998 or from other countries which have negotiated bilateral agreements.

In 2005-06 children were adopted by Queenslanders from India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, China, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand. In our state we have the International Adoptive

Families of Queensland, the IAFG, an Australian volunteer, non-profit support group for Queensland families involved in overseas adoptions. They offer support subgroups to families who adopt children from 14 countries.

Whilst community attitudes and acceptance of the practice of adopting children from overseas has changed immensely over the years, the intercountry adoption process is described by those trying to adopt a child in this manner as painfully slow, complex, expensive and demoralising. Long criticised for being archaic, the Queensland experience is now being labelled discriminatory due to the implementation of unfair and unjust fee increases as I will outline for honourable members in the House tonight.

On 3 August this year child safety minister Desley Boyle released a regulatory impact statement outlining proposed changes to adoption fees. These changes would: increase the application and expression of interest fees for all adoption programs from \$53 to \$60; increase the assessment fee for the Intercountry Adoption Program from \$2,000 to \$3,500; introduce a postplacement supervision fee for the Intercountry Adoption Program of \$1,500; increase the assessment fee for relative children's adoptions from \$146.30 to \$450—relative adoptions enable a child's relative or step-parent to apply to adopt the child; and remove the application fee of \$50 payable by a person seeking identifying information about an adopted person or birth parent, which is consistent with government policy not to charge citizens for information about their personal affairs held by a government agency.

The minister discarded option 1 to maintain the existing fee structure and increase existing fees in accordance with changes in CPI which would result in only marginal financial impact for prospective adoptive parents. Instead she selected option 2 which involves direct financial cost to prospective parents and an increase of 250 per cent or some \$5,000, confirming that the government's policy objectives are primarily cost recovery. This exercise will reap rewards of \$210,800 in 2007-08, increasing to \$493,000 in 2010-11. I am sure the minister in her reply will bang on that if the government implemented full cost recovery it would result in over a 500 per cent increase. That does not make this policy right, especially when we consider that fees for local adoption assessments are not increasing.

A notice from the department on 26 October said that an exemption from the postplacement fee will apply to all applicants whose names are on the assessment register prior to 28 October. This is everyone who has completed their assessment and been favourably assessed. That is about 30 per cent of current applicants.

The changes will affect existing applicants in the following way: couples who have not yet started their assessment and have not paid a fee will be required to pay the assessment fee of \$3,500 and they will be required to pay the \$1,500 postplacement fee when they return to Queensland with a child. Couples who have started their assessment and have paid a \$2,000 assessment fee will not pay any more by way of an assessment fee. Couples who have started but not yet completed their assessment will be required to pay the postplacement fee when they return to Queensland with a child. Couples who have completed their assessment will not have to pay the \$1,500 postplacement fee. If this was meant to be some sort of sweetener, it did not work. What about parents wishing to adopt a second child—parents like John and Kathy Kruger who face a three-year wait to adopt again and a fee hike.

But now let us go back four months. In making an announcement to a crowd of multicultural families on international day on 29 July at Logan only days earlier the then minister did not mention the impost she was about to inflict on these committed and patient families who simply want to give a child a loving home. She has not stuck around to cop the fallout; rather, that was given to the new minister.

True to the devious form of this Labor government under Beattie and now Premier Bligh, the minister announced that the adoption register would reopen on 29 October for a longer period of two years to give people more time to decide whether they want to adopt. How sneaky can they get? Fool the people and lap up the publicity, take photos and have the audacity to hand out brochures about intercountry adoption.

I bet the decent parents in these brochures are feeling used right now. Plenty of them are in contact with me and members across the state. They are hopping mad about the way the government is treating them. Give with one hand and whack with the other; crank up the fees like its state Labor counterparts to discourage people from choosing the overseas adoption path and punish Queenslanders who cannot adopt Australian children as so few are given up. At least its interstate mates included a hardship clause in the adoption application.

As one parent put it, 'We have two-tier pricing to coerce a group away from adoption towards fostering.' It has been suggested by some parents that the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal would have an interest in this unfair practice. Others believe it is a ploy to lay the foundation to steer Queensland parents to the new government policy One Chance at Childhood. Regarding this initiative, I ask the minister in her reply if she could inform the House just when she intends to disclose how One Chance at Childhood will operate. Changes to fees took effect from 15 October—a fortnight before the register reopened. The then minister lamely argued that her government had considered changing the fees for some time because government charges have not been increased in line with the consumer price index since 2002. Well, she has well and truly made up for that with a 250 per cent hike in one hit.

Minister Spence on 28 February 2002 informed intercountry adoption networks in a letter that \$2,000 was the 'full cost of assessment by an adoption case worker and would be fixed by regulation' and would only increase by CPI. Yet here we are five years later and all promises by that minister are being broken. We were also informed by Minister Boyle that assessing the suitability of a person or a couple to be adoptive parents is an extremely important task, one that is complex and costly. Minister Boyle said that at least five interviews are conducted and information about a person is analysed including their life skills, knowledge and experiences, qualities and strengths, and ability to respond to challenging events in a positive way. Well, she was right there. Indeed, it is a very intrusive and discriminatory process.

The *Sunday Mail* on 24 June this year reported that overweight couples are told that they are too fat to make good parents. Guidelines in South Korea and Taiwan say that couples with a body mass index of 30 are unacceptable, even though some doctors say that this measurement is not a good indicator of health. Whilst it is a country's right to impose restrictions, it makes one wonder if the same will apply here for local adoptions in the future. One prospective mother was shocked at the invasiveness required by the Korean government when it requested she test negative to two pregnancy tests.

I am not for a moment disputing the fact that adoption processes should be lenient. They should be very thorough, but if honourable members compare the invasive procedures these parents have to go through to those for foster-carers, who may have large numbers of children living with them for years on end, it looks very lopsided. Will this government's One Chance at Childhood policy cause parents to jump through as many hoops as intercountry adoptive couples do? Will they have to wait three or four years to have their applications processed? Perhaps one senior departmental staff member let slip the real reason intercountry adoptive parents are being victimised when she said that intercountry and step-children are not part of the child protection continuum as are local adoptions.

Infuriated prospective parents remind this heartless government that once these children return to Queensland with their parents they are Queensland children and the government has an obligation to them. Minister Boyle highlighted the need to provide regular reports to overseas authorities, saying assessments are conducted one month, four months, seven months and 10 months after the placement. Many parents have questioned the efficacy of these postadoption services, expressing concerns that if a problem arises there are no solutions and no capacity to deal with them. Staff, I am told, come out to do the assessments so they can send a report back without offering any support. Surely it would not be too difficult for the department to set up links to organisations such as Jigsaw and Pathways that run programs that address issues in the areas of behaviour and self-esteem to put parents in touch with proven programs that can assist them and their children. But there just does not seem to be any political will here.

Regardless of the increased revenue created by these fees, adoptive parents and their children will not be the benefactors of better services. Far from it. The same senior staff member I mentioned earlier admitted that 'fee increases will not result in an overall increase to the budget for adoption services' and 'the Department of Child Safety will receive less funding from the state budget to deliver adoption services to offset the increased fee revenue'.

Members of the public were invited to comment on the regulatory impact statement before the closing date—Friday, 31 August—in effect giving them less than a month to complete their submissions. Despite receiving 96 submissions, a paper petition from 3,462 petitioners requesting the House to abandon the proposed 250 per cent increase in these costs and an e-petition from 1,104 petitioners requesting the same tabled by the honourable member for Bulimba, the minister was not moved. I ask the minister to include in her reply how many submissions were in favour of these regulations.

Actor Deborra-Lee Furness, who is Australian born, said that if it were not for her US resident status she and her husband, movie star Hugh Jackman, would be childless. Deborra-Lee and I have accepted an invitation from Queensland's adoption network and will speak out at the injustices of these regulations at a picnic rally this Sunday. Affected parents shared the following with me—

It is so easy to see the bias of this Labor Government who through these regulations are selling the right to become parents to those who can afford it.

These are quotes from parents. Another said—

Adoptive parents are fundamentally opposed to paying twice for bureaucrat salaries. A 250 per cent increase is immoral and grossly unfair.

Another parent said—

The Minister and her department are discriminating against people whose only option for making a family may be through intercountry adoption.

Yet another said—

Clearly there is an abrogation of responsibilities here by stating that intercountry adopted children are not part of the child protection continuum ...

The area regarding the proposed removal of the application fee for obtaining identifying adoption information is an area of contention, because the government has been discriminating for years against adoptees and birth parents knowing that there have been fraudulent objections to information lodged

which prevent adoptees and birth parents the opportunity for recognition of an individual's right to their identity. We are now approaching 2008—some 18 years on—which means that each and every adopted person born between 1964 and 1990 will have attained the age of majority, the age when adoptees born after June 1991 will be able to access their identifying information without restriction. I urge the minister in her reply to confirm for all members that each and every objection to information and contact was verified and found to be submitted by the valid person, not through someone else who fraudulently lodged such objections.

In summary, intercountry adoption already costs between \$15,000 to \$40,000 for parents. The argument that an increase in assessment fees of \$3,000 is insignificant is rubbish. If this is all about cost recovery, why is there no increase to the cost of local adoption assessment? An efficient private agency operating on a true cost recovery basis can do it far more efficiently than a government that apparently is not even half focused. In the past this dedicated support group network has offered to help with the training but, sadly, the department has not taken up its offer. Until Child Safety officers and policy makers realise that adoption and fostering are not interchangeable in their outcomes for forever families, they will not improve the lot of either stakeholder group.