



Speech by

Tim Nicholls

MEMBER FOR CLAYFIELD

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ADOPTION OF CHILDREN AMENDMENT REGULATION (NO. 1) 2007

Mr NICHOLLS (Clayfield—Lib) (8.14 pm): I am very happy to support the motion moved by my friend the honourable member for Currumbin. In doing so, I particularly commend her for her hard work and commitment in raising this issue. It has not been easy. Already couples are paying between \$15,000 and \$40,000 in the hope of bringing a child with no family and no stable future into their lives here in Australia. It is cruel and unfair for this government to now impose a 250 per cent fee hike; a fee payable to a bureaucracy for the privilege of looking after and caring for another human being. We should be supporting prospective parents looking to adopt from overseas countries. Instead this cold and heartless government chooses to make the journey even more difficult for couples who already face a long and tough battle, both financially and emotionally, by charging them a further \$3,000 in fees.

Some comments have been passed to me from Meg from the ministerial office. They are the speaking notes that she passed around. I am grateful to the source of these. I will read the note into the record. It is interesting in terms of the instruction given to government members. It states—

It would be helpful if you did not refer to the new figure for adoptions being \$5,060 as I am sure the opposition will be reminding us enough times about that.

We will be reminding the government about the \$5,060. I thank Meg for passing that information on to us. We are always happy to receive from caring people information in relation to costs and the cold and heartless way that this Labor government chooses to make life difficult for Queenslanders.

It would be a rare case in which a financially stable Queensland family would think a 250 per cent increase insignificant, particularly when they are already forking out up to \$40,000 in the hopes of adopting a child. We understand that adoption is an expensive process. There are application fees, the cost of airfares, the expense of obtaining visas, and medical and processing fees. Prospective parents have to put a lot out before they get anything back. However, not many families have the savings to cover the expense of choosing to adopt—that is, \$40,000—so added to the total cost is the interest incurred on a financial loan. When it is all added up, the extra \$5,060 that the government does not want us to hear about and does not want its own side to mention does not seem so insignificant.

The government should be concentrating on supporting couples who choose to adopt. Currently there are no services provided by the government to help parents after they have adopted. We should be looking at making the process easier for new parents, both during and after the adoption process. That extra \$5,060 in fees can make a big difference in helping a family and helping a child who is suddenly brought into a new environment to live with new people.

It is unfortunate that Queensland couples hoping to adopt are not as financially well off as the likes of Brad, Angelina and Madonna. Having said that, even Hollywood's greatest would find things a lot harder and slower were they to try to adopt under Queensland's many difficult and confusing adoption laws. One person who has experienced just how hard it is to adopt in Australia is the wife of Hugh Jackman, Deborah-Lee Furness. After years of waiting on an Australian adoption list, the couple were forced to go to America, where it took less than a year for their adoption to go through. Ms Furness best described the adoption process in an interview with the *Sunday Mail* in which she stated, 'Australia has a generous spirit, yet this

to me reeks of fear and a lack of generosity.' In comparison she describes how the American adoption process was quick, inexpensive and not made impossible as it is here in Queensland, as evidenced by the \$5,060 that this cold and heartless Labor government will impose on people.

It is not unusual to hear stories of couples waiting two, three or even four years to adopt a child from overseas. It is a painfully slow and expensive process and, not surprisingly, it scares away couples desperate to provide a child with a loving family and a safe home. Yet even then, with the prospect of spending years on a waiting list, the state has been turning away hopeful couples as the backlog of people wanting to adopt gets too long.

Just four months ago the state Labor government decided to close the Queensland adoption register because of a backlog of applications. To give an idea of just how many Queensland couples are hopeful of adopting a child from overseas, in just 12 months there were nearly 700 applications lodged to adopt. Yet despite the phenomenal number of couples wanting to start their own family, red tape and bureaucracy—always the hallmark of Labor governments—see only a small number of intercountry adoptions in Queensland each year. During 2005-06 there were just 61 children adopted from overseas. Again I am indebted to Meg from the minister's office for providing us with a table of the details of those particular issues. She really is a very good adviser. I suggest that the minister look after her very well.

Of all the orphaned, homeless and needy children across the world and all the couples desperately wanting to adopt, just 61 were welcomed into Queensland homes. It is amazing that with all the prospective parents wanting to adopt we are not able to process more in a year. Of the 6,500 children who were adopted out of China last year, just seven were adopted by Queensland couples. It is unfair that couples face such a long and difficult journey when they make the decision to look overseas. They are often unable to have children of their own but have room in their hearts and homes for a child who may not be so fortunate. They provide the opportunity for a child who is living in less than desirable circumstances to enjoy the education, prosperity and freedom that Australia has to offer—but not before they pass a number of tough restrictions governing who can and cannot adopt. Each country has its own rules. In China it is preferred that the prospective parents have been married for a couple of years, while couples over the age of 50 will not be considered. Then there is the new fat law. Overweight couples have also been banned from adopting in South Korea and Taiwan. These are just some of the hurdles parents wanting to adopt can expect to face. They have to meet health standards, have a satisfactory legal history and be able to prove they have the necessary income to raise a child. The cost—physically, mentally and financially, is immense.

Yet it is important that we are selective about the parents who are allowed to adopt, provided it is within reason. We want to provide adopted children with parents who can support them, particularly when those children have already suffered and may suffer more at a young age. Most intercountry adoptions involve children from places that are less prosperous and fortunate than Australia. In 2005-06 Queensland families adopted children from India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, China, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand and Taiwan. Of the children adopted from overseas, around 89 per cent were under five years of age, with more than half infants who were just one year old or younger. Bringing these children from orphanages into the lives and homes of Australian families saves them from a life without a family where they would more than likely face the hardship of being forced to fend for themselves.

The circumstances in which these children enter the adoption system can be very sad. In some cases we hear the same reason for adoption come up again and again. For instance, in China—I know the minister will be interested in this—more than 95 per cent of the children adopted are girls who have been freed by their families because of China's controversial one-child policy. Established in 1979 as a temporary measure to curb the population growth, the one-child policy looks set to continue at least until 2010, which means that we can expect to see even more baby girls being put up for adoption.

It is unfortunate that the rule has seen a disdain by many families in China for female infants. Cases of abortion, neglect, abandonment and even infanticide have been known to happen to baby girls who are unwanted or are the second child. The policy's effect is so great that there is currently a disproportionate number of male to female babies being recorded as being born. Right now it is estimated that there are 114 boys for every 100 girls when the naturally occurring ratio would see 105 boys for every 100 girls. There are many stories coming out of places like China where these sorts of sad statistics are all too common. In a country where families rely on the income and hard work of each member of that family, the birth of a girl can be seen as another financial strain. It is those children that people here in Australia are looking to adopt. By adopting we are able to provide those children a loving family and a far brighter future than they would otherwise have.

It is important that we support the families who support adopted children. Raising fees by 250 per cent in the cold, heartless way that this government has does not make their lives any easier; it does not make it any more acceptable. Rather than raising fees, this government could be looking at how we can speed up the process and ensure a smooth transition for children and families who have already suffered enough. I urge the government to rescind this cruel, cold and heartless fee increase contained in the regulation.