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BABIES WITHOUT BORDERS

For many of us having children is a top priority. If, for some reason, we can't conceive naturally, there are alternatives like IVF or adoption. But the number of babies available locally for adoption has dropped dramatically in the last decade. Just 65 Australian babies were adopted last year, compared to 9,000 in 1972. Increasingly, Australians who want to adopt are looking overseas where millions of babies and children are homeless. But many people say they're stymied by the bureaucracy here.

Updated Updated 23 August 2013
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Is Australia an anti-adoption nation?

Stars like Angelina Jolie and Oprah Winfrey have made adoption of overseas children look uncomplicated, effortless and almost trendy. But while the process for adoption in the US is relatively quick and easy, soon-to-be parents in Australia complain of miles of red-tape and an anti-adoption bureaucracy.

By world standards we adopt a mere trickle of kids from overseas, only 300-400 each year out of 40,000 worldwide. This despite long queues of prospective parents, who often wait for years before being allocated a child.

Parents say the process is flawed, and are frustrated that each State department can set their own requirements for adoption including how much an applicant must pay, how old they can be, and in some states even dictating their body weight.

Late last year, the Federal Government released its first major report into overseas adoption. The Minister responsible for the inquiry, Bronwyn Bishop, said that what she found alarming was an “anti-adoption culture that permeates the bureaucracy”.

So why are we so cautious when it comes to adoption? And what of the adopted children themselves, how do they deal with their dual identities?

Tonight on **Insight** we bring together children adopted from overseas, their parents, and those still waiting to adopt to discuss what's going wrong.

Transcript

JENNY BROCKIE: So, how easy should it be to adopt a child from another country? In a moment, we'll talk about that. But first, Amanda Collinge with a group of Melbourne parents and their children celebrating a meeting of two cultures.

MEETING OF TWO CULTURES STORY:

REPORTER: Amanda Collinge

Bacchus Marsh is just out of Melbourne and a long way from Ethiopia. But these Victorian families do their best to bridge that gap for the children they've adopted from there. Once a year, they gather at this camp to swap tales and celebrate Ethiopian culture.

PAUL CARNEY: We embrace the clothing, the food, the music, it means something - a bit more to us perhaps, than everyone else and so it's a great thing that we've adopted a boy, but we've also have a licence to be part of a whole fantastic culture.

Paul and Jenny Carney adopted Hannok four years ago from Ethiopia. They already had a biological daughter, Adele, now 10.

JENNY CARNEY: He wanted to be part of our family and straight away he just saw Adele as the powerhouse and so quickly bonded with her, you know, and she with him. So therefore the family knitted quite easily, quite quickly.

ADELE CARNEY: When we got Hannok, he wouldn't say a word of English and then he sort of started to copy us and now he can't stop talking.

He's a chatterbox, is he?

ADELE: Yeah.

Would you recommend that it's a good thing for families to do, to adopt a child from another country?

ADELE: Yeah, it's great.

HANNOK: If they don't have a family.

ADELE: And it helps that country as well.

But do you think Australia's a good country to grow up in as a kid?

HANNOK: Yep.

Why?

HANNOK: Because I have lots of toys and things to play with.

So are you glad that you're growing up here?

HANNOK: Yep.

Do you think you might ever want to go back to Ethiopia for a visit?

HANNOK: Probably not.

Why not?

HANNOK: I don't know. Because there's nothing to do there.

Rosemary and David adopted Zuri when she was six months old. She'd been abandoned and was living in an orphanage.

ROSEMARY HERMANS: Are you adopted? Where are you from? Where are you from?

ZURI: Australia.

ROSEMARY: Australia.

I've always wanted to adopt, ever since I was about a teenager and that opinion and belief and what we felt we wanted to do was enhanced by me working at World Vision.

Yeah, I saw the need. I saw that there were children available under extreme circumstances that unfortunately they were in orphanages or both parents had died.

But there is a long waiting period that angers many adoptive parents. Currently in Australia, they wait between three and six years from the time they apply until they're allocated a child from Ethiopia.

PAUL CARNEY: In Victoria at the moment you could well wait, if today was your starting day, five years. That might change but we have no idea if change is going to come because we're never the instrument of change. We just wait and we're frightened, as adoptive parents, to be overly critical because that queueWHEREver it exists, might find our file sitting at the very end of it because we were protesting against the process. So you're very powerless.

Jenny and Paul Carney waited three years for Hannok. They had in fact wanted to adopt two children who were siblings.

JENNY CARNEY: Our daughter was five years old and we felt that we are both teachers, so we had a huge amount of experience with children, young children, and we felt we would be able to cope best with siblings.

But their application was knocked back by the Victorian Department of Human Services who said the impact would be too great on their daughter.

JENNY CARNEY: And as much as we tried to convince them that we knew her best and we felt that we would be able to deal with whatever situation arose with siblings, they backed the social worker who had made the decision against us.

Jenny and Paul were devastated and angry that they'd been denied the right of natural parents to plan their families at will. They appealed the decision, but lost.
Rosemary and David are now waiting to adopt a second child. Even though they've been through the process once, they still have to wait for three to six years. They worry about the growing age gap between Zuri and her prospective sibling.

ROSEMARY: We have no problems with reference checking and police checks and all the things we need to do to be assessed, counsellors coming, have no problems, but to wait four or five years is unreasonable in our view. Yeah.

DAVID HERMANS: The gap's too great between the children that we'd get.

JENNY BROCKIE: Rosemary, I wonder how much longer you're prepared to wait for a sibling for Zuri?

ROSEMARY HERMANS, ADOPTIVE PARENT: The reality is we've given up. We wanted a sibling for Zuri from her birth country Ethiopia, but we're not prepared to wait six years. Three - even three's unreasonable. So we've been in the lucky and fortunate position that we're able to have a birth child and I'm now four months pregnant.

JENNY BROCKIE: So you weren't seeking to adopt because you couldn't conceive naturally?

ROSEMARY: No.

JENNY BROCKIE: It was a different kind of choice for you?

ROSEMARY: Yeah, we've always wanted to adopt. We've had the resources to do that. I've seen the need, there's orphaned children that want a family, a hope, a security and love. We felt that we had those attributes. But in adopting Zuri we're the ones that have won. I mean - clearly gorgeous and we've just - it's changed our lives, our family's, our community and Australia's benefit from the cultural link that's brought.

JENNY BROCKIE: So what's been the main hold up? Why that length of time? What's the reason you're given?

ROSEMARY: More people applying, the rules, the quota systems, the delays in being processed... Maybe a question for the Government. We don't understand. It's too long.

JENNY BROCKIE: Julia, you've adopted six children and two of them are here tonight. Clearly, the process must have been a bit quicker for you in the ACT than it was for Rosemary?

JULIA ROLLINGS, ADOPTIVE PARENT: It has, the time length has varied over the years, but we did

manage to do four adoptions in about 13 years. So each of our adoptions took about three years.

JENNY BROCKIE: And how did you feel about the system you had to go through in the ACT, because it varies from State to State, doesn't it?

JULIA ROLLINGS: It does, it does. It wasn't easy and I don't believe it should be too easy. I think it's important that parents really understand what they need to put in to make the experience a positive one, particularly for the children.

JENNY BROCKIE: Would you have your children, all those children if you'd lived somewhere else in Australia?

JULIA ROLLINGS: No, that is something that I still find frustrating, that with the criteria in other States with the number of children we had, with my husband's age, with my weight - I've lost a lot of weight since we were adopting - any of those factors, even the age of Madhu having been about 10 when he came to our family, they would have excluded our family from being as it was.

JENNY BROCKIE: Your weight would have excluded you?

JULIA ROLLINGS: Yes.

JENNY BROCKIE: How would that have been the case?

JULIA ROLLINGS: Because I have lost 40 kilos so I was over the weight that is the maximum allowed in some of the States at the time that we adopted our children.

JENNY BROCKIE: So it was OK in the ACT, but it wouldn't have been OK in, say, Queensland?

JULIA ROLLINGS: Well in the ACT they just didn't make it an arbitrary limit. If you had a weight issue then you might need medical advice on whether or not that was likely to be an impediment to your parenting.

JENNY BROCKIE: Christine Sams, if you'd been living, say, in Queensland, would you have the child you have now - who you adopted from China?

CHRISTINE SAMS, ADOPTIVE PARENT: No, I wouldn't have. No, I adopted my daughter in NSW and moved up to Queensland just after the adoption. I know of single women in Queensland who've moved down to NSW to adopt and some who are planning to move down.

JENNY BROCKIE: So as a single woman, you couldn't adopt in Queensland, but you could adopt in NSW?

CHRISTINE SAMS: That's right.

JENNY BROCKIE: So all you really do is move States if you want to apply, is that right?

CHRISTINE SAMS: That's right, I'd have to.

JENNY BROCKIE: Stephen Finkel, you live in Queensland and you've successfully adopted two children from Korea. How long did you have to wait?

STEPHEN FINKEL, ADOPTIVE PARENT: Jenny, for the first adoption it was four years and a second adoption - we had a biological set of twins in between our adoptions, so we had to put our second adoption on hold. But the second adoption was a similar time of about three years.

JENNY BROCKIE: And how did you feel about that process?

STEPHEN FINKEL: Look, the waiting is frustrating but we do need to make sure we have all the checks and balances in place and that the people who are going to adopt children from overseas are doing it for the very best intentions. So from a time perspective, we do need to have that time but, clearly, in a lot of areas the time is exaggerated and way too long and we should be looking at ways of reducing that time span.

JENNY BROCKIE: Basia, what about you - you've adopted from Columbia and Thailand, I think. What was the process of adoption like for you in NSW?

BASIA BONKOWSKI, AUTHOR, ADOPTIVE PARENT: Well, we waited three years for our son, he's from Columbia, and we waited a couple of years to allocation and then the papers all went to Columbia and then we waited for another year or so. And then when we decided to adopt our daughter from Thailand, that then took another three years as well.
When I hear other people's stories, it seems incredibly swift. But, you know, with our daughter, who you can see there, she... it was frustrating, that that wait again, that sitting around and waiting and there were quite a few times when we felt like just giving up.
What's extraordinary to me is also I hear about some families, say from Guatemala, who have been allocated the child and then they see the photo of the child and then they've waited nearly 15 months after that to actually go to get the child and these sorts of situations - they're quite preposterous the time.

JENNY BROCKIE: Bronwyn Bishop, you chaired a Federal inquiry into overseas adoption last year, do you think the current system's working?

BRONWYN BISHOP, FEDERAL MP: No, I don't. When we began the inquiry, I thought, "Oh, we'll have a look at this and it will be fairly quick and we'll wrap it up and make a report," and what we found was just amazing.

JENNY BROCKIE: What did you find?

BRONWYN BISHOP: Well the thing that staggered us most was the anti-adoption culture in the bureaucracy of the States and indeed in the Commonwealth in the bureaucracy itself.

JENNY BROCKIE: What do you mean by an anti-adoption culture?

BRONWYN BISHOP: There was an attitude that said that this really isn't necessarily a good thing to be doing. It began in the domestic area and you said there were 65 adoptions last year and yet there are 21,000 children in foster care. And this attitude that the biological link is always - must always predominate seems to colour the attitude of the bureaucracy. Now it's interesting to hear how much...

JENNY BROCKIE: But that's probably for good reason, isn't it? I mean there would be fears about things like the stolen generation, for example.

BRONWYN BISHOP: No, I don't think it is good, I think it's unhealthy. I think adoption is a legitimate way to form and add to a family. Yes, we must be careful. Yes, we must follow the guidelines of the Hague Convention. Yes, we must be very particular that people are adopting for the right reasons and that they are people of good character, but the way in which certain States conduct the interviews with social workers, with booklets in some States being 240 pages longWHEREas the same degree of questioning in another State might be 12 pages, the inconsistencies are mammoth.

JENNY BROCKIE: So which States are the worst?

BRONWYN BISHOP: Queensland.

JENNY BROCKIE: Queensland, why?

BRONWYN BISHOP: Without a doubt, Queensland. Queensland has shut it down altogether. They opened a window a short number of months ago and I think something like 500 families applied because they didn't know if it will ever be opened again.

JENNY BROCKIE: So there's a limited amount of time you can even apply?

BRONWYN BISHOP: There was. It was shut down, they opened a window and shut it again. You cannot apply in Queensland today.

JENNY BROCKIE: What else is there about the Queensland system that you're particularly critical of?

BRONWYN BISHOP: They have the body mass index.

JENNY BROCKIE: This is the weight requirement.

BRONWYN BISHOP: The weight requirement.

JENNY BROCKIE: You have to be a certain weight, but presumably that's for health reasons, yes?

BRONWYN BISHOP: No, no, no. No, it's a rigid rule. It's got nothing to do with how healthy the person may be, it's an arbitrary rule.
Other States have all sorts of peculiarities. NSW requires would-be parents to be fingerprinted. Other States require even if you're successful in having the child allocated, in Victoria, they require you actually to have a physical pregnancy test to make sure you're not pregnant and if you are they'll cancel the adoption, despite the fact the child has been allocated. There are all sorts of strange attitudes that permeate..

JENNY BROCKIE: I should point out here that we did invite the Queensland minister to appear tonight who's responsible for adoption and he was unavailable and we've invited bureaucrats from other States as well and ministers who have declined our request. Does that surprise you?

BRONWYN BISHOP: No, no, it doesn't. I found it interesting when we brought our report down and we made 27 recommendations, some of which relate to States and things they can do straight away, the Queensland minister actually put out a press release saying they'd wait until they saw what the Commonwealth was going to do before they responded. Well, that's not necessary, they could get on with it straightaway.

JENNY BROCKIE: I should point out the Queensland minister did say he was ill, we heard from a spokesperson.

BRONWYN BISHOP: I'm very sorry to hear that.

JENNY BROCKIE: OK, Stephen Finkel, getting back to the issues that Bronwyn Bishop raised about inconsistencies in the system, or what she regards as unacceptable things, now you object to the interview process in Queensland for adoption, don't you? Why? What is it that you object to?

STEPHEN FINKEL: Some of the aspects of the interview process - what we've got to remember with in Queensland, the Department responsible for adoptions is the Department of Child Safety and unfortunately, the people who work in that Department see the very worst side of parenting.
They come in with a preconceived idea when they first interview a person what their motives are and they're treated through the whole process, even once a couple's been, you know, met all the checks and balances and are legitimate adoptive parents, they are still scrutinised right to the very end and that's where we're kind of - there's a lot of people...

JENNY BROCKIE: What do you mean scrutinise? What it is that you don't like?

STEPHEN FINKEL: They have to find something wrong with the couple. They're trying always to find... there must be a reason why this couple... There's got to be something in their closet that they haven't told us about. It's very, very intrusive.

JENNY BROCKIE: But doesn't the process need to be rigorous?

STEPHEN FINKEL: It does.

JENNY BROCKIE: You're being potentially given the lifetime rights to a child, to another person, another human being.

BASIA BONKOWSKI: Yes, but why should they look in your linen cupboard, which I've heard of, you know, of people going and looking and asking to see the linen cupboard or to say, you know, "Why do you want so many children, you haven't got enough knees for them to sit on." I mean it's just ridiculous.

JENNY BROCKIE: Did they say things like that to you?

BASIA BONKOWSKI: No, I wrote a book about adoption and one of the families that I talked to, they had that situation. They were told to go out and practise parenting with the dogs. And it was just absurd things, you do hear silly things and so it worries you. I mean, you can be lucky, like we were, and have a good social worker, but some families have had ridiculous questions and ridiculous intrusions.

JENNY BROCKIE: Has anyone else had ridiculous questions?

ADELE CARNEY: We've had people... we've had in... coming from Victoria you get 17 pages of questions to answer. You have to write your autobiography, both couples write their life story which can take forever and by the time you've done all that there's not much they don't know about you. It's every little aspect of your life. And I can see the need for checks and balances but I just think that's ridiculous.

JENNY BROCKIE: While parents complain about bureaucracy and hold-ups and things like that, what happens to the kids whose lives are changed forever. Here's Amanda Collinge with one young woman's story.

ANNA-LEE MATTHEWS STORY:

REPORTER: Amanda Collinge

Anna-Lee Matthews came to Australia in the '70s during Operation Baby Lift, when hundreds of Australian parents adopted orphans from the Vietnam War. She was just 10 months old.

ANNA-LEE MATTHEWS, ADOPTEE: Adoptees can kind of go two ways in the situation, you know. They can kind of go towards challenging their adoptive parents just to test that love, you know, or we can go down the other end of the continuum, which I tended to go, which was, you know, trying to make sure there was no reason that they would reject me, like, you know, I guess like we feel the birth mother might have done.

Anna-Lee grew up in a country town, isolated from any Vietnamese community or other adopted kids. For some years, she rejected her own cultural background.

ANNA-LEE: My folks didn't get the education that adopting parents get today, which is just fantastic. So they didn't know that it was important to retain the connection between the culture and the country and that sort of thing.

For a while, Anna-Lee even had racist attitudes towards other Asians.

ANNA-LEE: Yeah, it's a horrible thing to say. But yeah, I did for a while. I just didn't gravitate towards Asian people, you know. I feel, and even today, you know, I feel like a blonde-haired surfie chick who grew up at the beach and it's quite surprising when I look in the mirror and I'm not. So, you know, it's quite confusing this whole inter-country adoption thing.

But three years ago, Anna-Lee took herself back to Vietnam and to the orphanage from where she'd been adopted. She did find a new sense of connection and pride, but was unable to find any information about her birth family.

ANNA-LEE: Nothing. My paperwork says that I was abandoned at birth and born to unknown parents. So it's pretty hard.

Anna-Lee describes herself as happy and successful, but says she struggles constantly with fear of abandonment and a deep sense of loss.

ANNA-LEE: It just sort of blew my mind, you know, when I was growing up that I could have ended up anywhere in the whole world, and I ended up in my family with my fantastic parents and fantastic brothers and it was just a love-filled family. You know, that said, I really do sort of consider myself a pretty good example of, you know, the fact that love's very important in this situation when you're talking about inter-country adoption, but it's certainly not enough.
It doesn't make up for the stuff you lose. I kind of call it the black hole, you know, my beginning starts at the age of 10 months and before that I don't know.

Would you like purple streaks in your hair like that?

Anna-Lee now spends a lot of time with adoptive parents advising them on how to bridge the cultural divide and supporting the kids as well.

ANNA-LEE: They're not just adopting a child. They need to be willing to make a commitment to adopting the culture and the country.

Although Anna-Lee says she would never adopt herself, she's committed to improving the process for future generations of adopted children.

ANNA-LEE: And what a lot of, you know, adopting parents don't understand is that while their moment of joy, you know, happens and they get this baby, you know, this baby has just been through the most enormous trauma that anyone can go through.

JENNY BROCKIE: Lynelle Beverage, you were also adopted from Vietnam in 1973. Does Anna-Lee's story strike a chord for you?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE, ADOPTEE, VIETNAM: Yeah, in fact that's how we knew each other because she had a very similar upbringing as I did in Victoria in a remote, kind of rural area adopted into families with natural children from our parents. So a lot of our lives are reflected.

JENNY BROCKIE: And you grew up on a rural dairy farm, is that right?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: That's right.

JENNY BROCKIE: What was that like for you?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: I guess it was very, very isolating. I grew up looking, you know, being the only Asian, the only... actually the only non-Australian in my area and at school. So it wasn't actually until I moved to Sydney when I was 17 that I met other Asian people.

JENNY BROCKIE: And do you identify with that description of the black hole?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: Definitely.

JENNY BROCKIE: And feeling more like a blonde-headed surfie chick, or whatever the equivalent is on a dairy farm?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: Yeah, yeah, Well, pretty much yeah. I must say for me, I've experienced the black hole and I can say that I'm through the black hole and have found that there is great things beyond it.

JENNY BROCKIE: What about her comment that she was almost racist against Asians, did you feel like that?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: Definitely.

JENNY BROCKIE: Did you?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: Yeah. I grew up - I mean I think it was actually a reflection of the country and where Australia was at. I mean, you know, 35 years ago we were just out of a White Australia policy. So very much the culture and the attitudes in that day was, you know, white Australia, White Australia policy.

JENNY BROCKIE: And you wanted to fit in?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: Well, I guess our parents adopted us assuming we would just fit in and didn't really think that, you know, the bigger picture of society was a little different to that.

JENNY BROCKIE: So, on balance, was it a good thing or a bad thing for you to be adopted?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: It's a question I don't have a black or white answer for. It's a good thing in many ways and of course, you know, like Anna-Lee talks about, there's a lot of things that you lose, but I guess that's the journey of the adoptee as you grow older where you've got to try and make up for that somehow.

JENNY BROCKIE: Chris Warner, what about you, you were adopted from Korea.

CHRIS WARNER, ADOPTEE, KOREA: Yep.

JENNY BROCKIE: Did you feel Korean or did you feel Australian or what did you feel?

CHRIS WARNER: I didn't feel Korean at all because the fact is I grew up and still live in the Hawkesbury, and if you've ever been to the Hawkesbury it's a fantastic place to drive through and visit, lots of country, little artefact stores.

JENNY BROCKIE: It's not Korea.

CHRIS WARNER: It's not Korea and I was one of the only Asians in the area and because I was like a small kid back then I did experience a lot of racism just towards... random people just come up, like one person came up and spat on me and just told me to go back to my country. I didn't even know the person, it just happened.
So, like, generally I associate, like, being Asian as probably not the best thing in the whole entire world but I generally think I've come through that and like I said, I definitely feel I had the whole black hole thing in my heart. I definitely feel like there were some pieces missing.

JENNY BROCKIE: How did you deal with that? How did you deal with that black hole in your heart?

CHRIS WARNER: Definitely by learning a little bit more about Korea and sort of embracing that Korean side of it and I definitely feel that I went too far at one stage and became a little bit too Korean and forgot about where I've come from and what made me special and everything, but also finding my actual original

birth family in Korea and going back to Korea. All those sort of things, embracing myself in the culture made everything absolutely... like made everything seem worthwhile. Now I have a very pro-adoption point of view.

JENNY BROCKIE: So you're pro-adoption?

CHRIS WARNER: I think a lot of people talk about the wonderful miracles of having a natural birth child, but I think having an adopted child is actually a more greater miracle because the fact is you're taking a child from a different background and different culture and taking it into your own house and loving it as your very own child and that shows to me what kind of parents they are. They're fantastic parents because they're willing to just forget all about that culture, forget about the race, they just break it down to the key issue, which is love.

JENNY BROCKIE: That must be OK for you to hear, Jeff?

JEFF WARNER, ADOPTIVE PARENT: I've got a very comfortable feeling, yes.

JENNY BROCKIE: Lynelle, do you feel that way? You don't feel quite the same, do you?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: Probably because I have a lot of interaction with a lot of adoptees throughout Australia. I know that the - that may not be the general feeling across, you know, a whole heap of people. And I do know that there are a lot of adoptees who feel that way, but I also know that there's another lot of adoptees who I guess are probably more afraid to speak up, to say, you know, it's not all rosy and it's not all, you know, easy.

JENNY BROCKIE: I'd like some comments from the parents here listening to these stories. Stephen Finkel, I wonder if in your passion to help these children, do you think about the possible confusion that's created for them by being thrown into another culture like this?

STEPHEN FINKEL: Exactly. I mean basically if you take an adopted child, if you were to wake up in an Asian city tomorrow morning and not know how you got there and the smells were different, the food's different, you just become an adopted person because they've lost everything.
I think what's happened over the last 30 years we understand so much more and adopted parents now actually embrace the culture now. One of the things in our family is we're one family, two cultures.

JENNY BROCKIE: Julia, with six adopted children, six identity crises? Have you been dealing with six different situations with your kids?

JULIA ROLLINGS: I think every child's different. Every child you have to treat as an individual. They all react differently. But I do believe it's really important to link them in with their birth culture, with other adoptees, with people that share the identity that they have because it does raise particular issues for the kids and they're issues that, as a white Australian mother, I really don't know. They're not my experiences so you need to link the kids in with people that do have similar experiences themselves.

JENNY BROCKIE: It is the big ethical debate around overseas adoption of course - is the child better off with a new Australian family than it would be if it stayed in its birth country? Here's Amanda Collinge again.

MEETING OF TWO CULTURES STORY: PART 2

REPORTER: Amanda Collinge

It was four years ago that Paul and Jenny Carney went to Ethiopia to meet their adopted son, Hannok, for the first time.

JENNY CARNEY - 2002: I'm very happy, he's a beautiful boy. Now we've got a big family, it's great.

They knew Hannok had lost both parents, but apart from that were given very little information about his family background.

PAUL CARNEY: Most people get a couple of paragraphs of information and perhaps a little passport-size photo. But you've decided anyway.

REPORTER: Given that you had so little information, did you ever have any doubts that he may have actually had a family?

PAUL CARNEY: Well, yes, but not parents.

JENNY CARNEY: We found out that he'd been cared for by his aunt and we were lucky enough when we were in Ethiopia to be able to meet her and make a connection with her and meet his grandfather as well. So we have an ongoing - we are one of the very lucky people that we have an ongoing relationship with them.

Paul and Jenny admit that meeting Hannok's aunt was a tremendously sad moment for both her and them.

PAUL CARNEY: She'd already relinquished him a few months before, but this was the physical separation for who knows how long and she had a great interpreter who was expressing that words like, you know, "God has blessed us for the fact that he is going to a place where he'll get a lot of benefit in his life and even though it's sad for me, I realise that this is the best I can give him."

JENNY CARNEY: She was a single woman who had no children, so therefore she had to work to survive and she had no way of caring for him.

REPORTER: As a mother, were you sure that you were doing the right thing by Hannok?

JENNY CARNEY: Yes, because I felt personally as a mother I had a lot more to give than having one daughter and he needed mothering. He is a very affectionate child and he needed fathering as well and he enjoys having a sister so therefore that relationship I don't think he would have had if he had stayed in Ethiopia. He would have grown up by himself.
I can recognise that we have taken him away from his birth country, but we try to encourage his belief in himself as an Ethiopian Australian and hopefully that he will want to go back himself, maybe not to live there, but certainly to visit and certainly try to encourage him to want to maybe work in some way with Ethiopia.

PAUL CARNEY: Adopting from Ethiopia is one of the great things we can do as a country. And if we could get this process quicker for people who wish to do it, then it would be good for Ethiopia and really good for people in Australia.

JENNY BROCKIE: Lynelle, can I get your response to that. I'm interested in what you think watching that story.

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: I guess the biggest thing that is highlighted for me is that, you know, we talk a lot about the loss of culture, but I think we forget that there's more than just the loss of culture. For an adoptee, it's very much an emotional loss in the sense that you don't have any beginnings, you don't have anyone you look like. It's all the things that most people would take for granted about, you know, looking physically like someone, having a personality like someone.
So, for children growing up it's great that we can, you know, embrace the culture and try and encourage them to go back and all that kind of thing but I think we need to be mindful of the emotional aspects of what the children go through.

JENNY BROCKIE: Erica, what do you think when you look at that? You were adopted here in Australia, your birth father was Chinese-Malaysian and your birth mother was Irish-Australian and you've worked for DOCS advising perspective parents. When you see that story and when you hear the history of that child, what do you think?

ERIKA BERZINS, ADOPTEE, AUSTRALIA: I guess very similar to Lynelle. I think it's very easy for us to sort of say, "We can embrace the culture and make that a part of our family," but there's the actual emotional separation from anybody biologically connected to you is quite significant and does cause an enormous amount of trauma.

JENNY BROCKIE: So do you think that's an issue, the fact that that particular child had an aunt and a grandfather in the country? I mean what is the alternative if they don't have the money to..?

ERIKA BERZINS: I guess from my perspective, and it's not necessarily a very popular view, is that I think I would like to see us trying to actually keep these children within their own cultures.

JENNY BROCKIE: So what are you suggesting should happen in a situation like that?

ERIKA BERZINS: That we actually assist rather than, I guess, looking at both ends of it but we assist to keep those children within their own countries.

JENNY BROCKIE: Financially assist?

ERIKA BERZINS: Absolutely, absolutely.

JENNY BROCKIE: Paul, I'd like your response, because the story's about you and your decision.

PAUL CARNEY: Well I'd have to argue for the primacy of the family. All the money in the world won't give a child who has no mother and no father and no sister those things and his life will be infinitely better for the fact that he's got that, I think.
It's never going to happen that all of a sudden the problems of developing countries are solved through buckets of money. Those children, such as our son, won't get a family, nor will they have much of a future at all.

JENNY BROCKIE: But some people would probably argue that child did have some family. Except that same family had relinquished him for adoption months before we ever arrived in Ethiopia. So they had reached the end of their resources.

ERIKA BERZINS: But what are the circumstances under which they've relinquished that child? I guess that's the question is that I'm not saying that we're pouring money into these countries to keep children in orphanages. I'm saying that we actually have to look at the entire infrastructure around it. Look at the Government policies that are in those countries and see how we can assist to keep those children in those countries, in a family structure in those countries.

JENNY BROCKIE: Now Paul?

PAUL CARNEY: You're talking about countries that don't have social welfare systems. The example of Ethiopia is a country running on $10 billion, that's the whole country, 70 million people. Those children have no future. There are hundreds of thousands and as the word mentioned before, it's a miracle that somehow they have accessed a person or a family in Australia that will want to bring them into their family.

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: The ultimate question, which Bronwyn raised, is if people are so concerned about children, why have we got thousands sitting in foster homes here - really?

ERIKA BERZINS: And why do we have children, why do we already have adoptees on lists called

special needs adoptees? Now not all of those children are highly dependent or highly disabled. Some of them are on that list because they're older and people don't want to adopt an older child.

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: I believe people are inter-country adopting because it's easier to get a child.

ERIKA BERZINS: Yes, absolutely.

JENNY BROCKIE: But they're saying it's harder because they've got to wait for four years.

ERIKA BERZINS: It is, but it's not as hard as, you know, doing it another way. And that's the issue, looking at the numbers of inter-country versus the number of local.

JENNY BROCKIE: Are you against inter-country adoption?

ERIKA BERZINS: I'm not totally against it. I think one of the dangers we have is we're looking for a one-size-fits-all solution and I don't think we're capable of doing that.

JENNY BROCKIE: Bronwyn, I think you wanted to say something.

BRONWYN BISHOP: I don't think we want to get the discussion confused that every child who comes has the capability of finding out who their relatives are and who they are. In ChinaWHERE most of the children now come from to Australia, there are 100,000 baby girls abandoned every year. Only 10,000 of them get adopted.
But more and more now, when people go to China to adopt, they go in clusters. And the children will come from the same region and the families are keeping them connected so that they're virtually in a cousin-to-cousin relationship although they're not biologically connected.

JENNY BROCKIE: Christine, you adopted from China, and Bronwyn's just mentioned the situation in China. Before that, you worked for seven years as a nurse in Chinese orphanages. What did you see, what was it like?

CHRISTINE SAMS: When I first started I started with a group that was working in an orphanage in the south of China and when the group first started working in there, there was almost 100% mortality rate amongst the young babies.

JENNY BROCKIE: And what about your child, what was your child's background?

CHRISTINE SAMS: She was abandoned as about 1-month-old under a bridge in her city and somebody passing by found her, took her to the police station and then from the police took her to the orphanage from there.

JENNY BROCKIE: Madhu, tell us what happened to you in India because you were a child labourer in India, I think, weren't you as a small child. And you're Julia's son?

MADHU ROLLINGS, ADOPTEE, INDIA: Yeah, well it happened to me when I was the age of 8 at a railway station. Well, while we were sleeping at the station with my father and my younger brother Sudan, well, during the night he slipped away so in the morning when I woke up...

JENNY BROCKIE: Your father disappeared?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Yeah, so in the morning when I woke up and saw him that he was gone, I knew then that he had abandoned us, abandoned us because he had tried the previous night with my younger brother Sudan and we searched around for him, couldn't find him. As we wandered around, some people realised what had happened to us so they gave us money for food and as we were wandering around a stranger came up to us and took us to court and after that I was placed in an orphanage.

JENNY BROCKIE: So you were 8 years old when that happened?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Yep. So I remember everything.

JENNY BROCKIE: You remember a lot about your life in India?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Yeah.

JENNY BROCKIE: What are the kinds of things that you remember about your life there?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Well, I remember most of the traumatic stuff like the abandonment and being a child labourer. And well, my family were pretty much slaves because they couldn't provide enough money to... well, they couldn't provide enough money for my education and we were in debt and we were living in a village and we were extremely poor.

JENNY BROCKIE: So what it was it like for you to go from that sort of life to the life you have here now?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Well, since leaving the orphanage I've taken a big change because I have a loving family now who have helped me to deal with my problems, with my past and have helped me to discover myself.

JENNY BROCKIE: And you've been back to India with the family?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Yeah, I went not with my family, I just went with my mother in 2001. I was...actually I enjoyed the trip very much. I felt more like a visitor because everything I was experiencing then was like... the culture felt like I was experiencing for the first time.

JENNY BROCKIE: Was that difficult? When you hear the stories you've heard tonight about people feeling torn or feeling a black hole or feeling something's missing or not quite knowing where they belong. Do you feel any of those things?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Well now that I think about it, not really, because, I don't know, for some reason it feels like I only had one life and that life is here in Australia. Because, I don't know, just over the years I've just come to accept that I think, or it's grown into me.

JENNY BROCKIE: Briony, what's it like for you because you're the biological daughter of Julia, one of two biological children in the family who've had all these siblings arrive, come in, what's that been like for you?

BRIONY ROLLINGS, ADOPTIVE SISTER: Well, it's been pretty constant for me. We first adopted when I was...

JENNY BROCKIE: There have been six of them.

BRIONY ROLLINGS: When I was three, so you know, you don't really think very deeply when you're three. It's always loud and it's never lonely. I've had to grow up with my family being very visual. We don't really, you know, we stand out a lot and that, that doesn't bother me.
But there are issues. Like I've... I've had to deal with racism and so have my siblings. Something that I've had to deal with when I've grown up like through teenage years and still now, when I go out with my brother, Madhu, people don't assume brother and sister, they assume we're a couple and that can be quite frustrating and embarrassing. And often when people do find out that we're brother and sister, they automatically assume that somehow that makes our relationship different, that somehow we would get on better or we would get on worse because he's adopted, and that's not true.

JENNY BROCKIE: That's not the case?

BRIONY ROLLINGS: No.

JENNY BROCKIE: So as far as you're concerned, it's a sibling?

BRIONY ROLLINGS: Yes, I mean all of my relationships with my siblings are different, but their adoption is irrelevant.

JENNY BROCKIE: Suanne, what about you, you were adopted from an orphanage in Vietnam in 1975. Do you know much about your past?

SUANNE PRAGER, ADOPTEE, VIETNAM: No. I was adopted during the Vietnam War and I was very lucky to be adopted by an Adelaide-Australian family and we...from what we know, I was abandoned, totally abandoned. We don't know how long I'd been in the orphanage. I was 3 years and 9 months old when I came to Australia. And I came on one of the baby lift flights to Australia at the very near end of the war. And I do have a Vietnamese name and that's pretty much all I have, and a birth date. And yeah, but we don't really know if either of those are actually real. So if I wanted to search for my parents or anything that might be the first block. They might not really lead anywhere.

JENNY BROCKIE: How do you feel about that, about that background? And how do you deal with that?

SUANNE PRAGER: Now that I've gotten a bit older and I think in my 20s, I pretty much was surviving a really terrible mental illness that I think I'm starting to get on top of, which is exciting. But now that I'm getting better and more interested in, you know, settling down maybe sometime if I was lucky having children, now the thought of perhaps never knowing my biological mother, more so than ever, is a bit... is very painful for me.

JENNY BROCKIE: And of course a lot of those feelings do come up when you think about being a parent, don't they? You look into your own life and your own background?

SUANNE PRAGER: I just reassure my parents in Adelaide I'm not pregnant.

JENNY BROCKIE: It's OK, Mum and Dad, she's not pregnant.

SUANNE PRAGER: I just mean I'm old enough now to be interested in having children. I think I'm very lucky I was adopted into my family and they already had three children of their own and so I was the youngest and I've had a ball in my 20s watching my nieces and nephews be born and grow up and been able to sit back and go, "Now, you wouldn't want to rush into that." They're gorgeous.

JENNY BROCKIE: Lynelle, from the work you do with - the support group work that you do, how widespread are problems like mental illness, for example, those sorts of problems with adoptive kids?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: There's plenty of them for me to know that, you know, adoption's not just a positive experience. I have plenty of adoptees who, you know, do seek support because they just don't know where to turn and it's a pity that we don't have, you know, that support infrastructure out there.

JENNY BROCKIE: I suppose the question is how do you know it's because they're adopted and how do you know, it might be something else?

LYNELLE BEVERIDGE: I guess it's a chicken and an egg. Maybe their parents had a mental illness and that's why it's got to a situation where they've had to be adopted, I don't know. But I guess the key point is having lost your parents and your family and your identity is big enough a trauma, let alone adding on top of that a transcultural or whatever, inter-country adoption, because that just adds another layer to the trauma that you've got to deal with.

JENNY BROCKIE: Getting back to the system, Bronwyn Bishop, given that we are talking about people's lives here and how important it is for that process, given a lot of things we've heard tonight, to be rigorous, isn't it important to keep a rigorous system. Do you want to see us go the way of the US, for exampleWHERE it's much easier to adopt a child?

BRONWYN BISHOP: I don't want to see us mimic anybody else. I want us to improve our own system. I think the Commonwealth Government, and in our report we've said the Commonwealth has been too hands-off and they've let the State Governments really run it.
Now basically, the relationship between a parent and thee child they're adopting is governed by State law but when you become a citizen of Australia that's Federal law.

JENNY BROCKIE: So you want to take it over? You want to take the system over?

BRONWYN BISHOP: No, no, we don't want to take it over because you can't take over that part where the States are governing the relationship between the adopting parents and the children. But we want the way they do it harmonised. We don't want to say, "We want you to all meet one particular standard," because that might be the worst one. It might be NSWWHERE you have to pay a $10,000 fee.

JENNY BROCKIE: Whereas in Tasmania you pay $2,000.

BRONWYN BISHOP: There are lots of things like that. And the ACT is actually quite progressive and it comes from leadership within the individual bureaucracies that we want to see changed.

JENNY BROCKIE: So you do want to see it stay in State hands but you want more control?

BRONWYN BISHOP: We want the Federal Government to have more say and be more engaged in giving leadership to the way there's a harmonisation and in the way we conduct or negotiate the agreements with foreign countries.

JENNY BROCKIE: Closer to the American system, is that what you'd like to see?

BRONWYN BISHOP: No, no, they have a different system again. I want ours to be intrinsically Australian. I want to see the...

JENNY BROCKIE: Easier, do you want it to be much easier to adopt a child from overseas?

BRONWYN BISHOP: I want it to be fairer because it's not fair now. I think, whoever it was that said that the people who are handling adoptions in the bureaucracy are dealing with dysfunctional families all the time, it's the equivalent of DOCS around Australia and they're always looking for the criminality or for the...

JENNY BROCKIE: DOCS is the Department of Corrective services in NSW.

BRONWYN BISHOP: Yes. And they're dealing with families which are behaving badly to children. Whereas these are parents who are looking for behaving well and yet they're treated the same, with that same sort of attitude.

JENNY BROCKIE: What about the baby trafficking business, I want to ask you about this because just last month a Chinese court sentenced the director of an orphanage to 15 years in jail for selling babies. Are you worried that if the system is loosened up, it will encourage other countries to engage in that kind of thing, to provide babies, whatever way they can, for parents who are desperate?

BRONWYN BISHOP: No, I don't have that concern because here we have ratified the Hague Convention and the Hague Convention sets out where and how and why you can adopt children from other countries.

JENNY BROCKIE: I'm interested in, and we are running out of time, but there's one question I'd

like to ask the parents here, which is the question of neediness. Have you all looked into your own neediness versus the child's needs? How much do you look at what you need as well as what the child might need? Paul?

PAUL CARNEY: I think you ask yourself, "Why am I doing it?" Of course. And you really travel a difficult journey emotionally before you actually do adopt. One of the things you ask is, "What can I give?" "What do I want to do that's meaningful in my life?" And adopting a child from overseas is a gift to the child, but it is a great gift to us as well. It's an immeasurable gift. So I think the answer is both.
But it's not necessarily purely self-interest or purely altruism by which we adopt, it's always both.

JENNY BROCKIE: Julia, have you thought about that question, of your needs to have these children as opposed to what's good for the children? Do you weigh those things up when you adopt?

JULIA ROLLINGS: If they match, if it's complementary, I think that's the best answer. I don't think it should be an act of charity, adopting. I mean my kids have given back what we've given to them tenfold. So, you know, even with all its problems these kids were starting off from a very hard place, they'd already experienced incredible trauma and I think sometimes we get adoption issues mixed up with abandonment issues, with the issues the kids had.
I mean Mahdu had incredible trauma and pain when he came to us. I know adoption added issues to him with losing his culture and other things but his basic issues had been the abandonment and the loss of his first family and that had already happened. So, I believe we helped put some of the bits back together again as well.

JENNY BROCKIE: Mahdu, do you want to comment on that?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Yeah, I agree with what she says and yeah, coming over to Australia has helped me find out my past and put it all together. And now I can say anything about my past without crying.

JENNY BROCKIE: And you couldn't do that before?

JULIA ROLLINGS: No, when he first came to us...

MADHU ROLLINGS: Yeah, when I first came, as soon as someone mentioned or I thought of my birth family I used to sob.

JULIA ROLLINGS: He lived in the orphanage for over two years and from the first day when somebody had interviewed him, that had been it. Nobody ever spoke about his abandonment or what had happened to him again.

MADHU ROLLINGS: So yeah, it was just building up.

JULIA ROLLINGS: His younger brother had actually stopped speaking the day he was abandoned and didn't start speaking until about three or four weeks after he came to our family. So that kind of trauma was already there. We can help the kids try and deal with that, but we can't take that away.

JENNY BROCKIE: That's a big journey and now you're on national television speaking. It's a very interesting story. What do you think would have happened to you if you'd stayed in India, Mahdu?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Well, it's hard to say, but I don't think I would have lasted long, because in the orphanage, well because me and my brother we were there together, after you reach a certain age they split you up. So I would have moved out to another orphanage and he would have stayed there and we would have stayed there and I would have been shattered even more.

JENNY BROCKIE: Where's your brother now?

MADHU ROLLINGS: He's at home.

JENNY BROCKIE: In the family? So you came together?

MADHU ROLLINGS: Yeah, so I'm very happy.

JENNY BROCKIE: I think that might be a really good note to end on. I'd like to thank everybody here very much for joining Insight tonight. Terrific to have you and thank you very much for sharing your personal stories with us too, we do appreciate it.

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