



**Cliff Picton
reports on
the**

**FIRST
AUSTRALIAN
CONFERENCE
ON ADOPTION**

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1976**



Cliff Picton

A Watershed

The conference which took place at the University of New South Wales in February this year marked a watershed in the history of adoption in Australia. Apart from a small number of senior social welfare officials who, curiously, seemed to question the need for a national conference, the event and its outcomes have more than justified the efforts and expectations of the conference planners. Katherine Lancaster, the Conference Chairman, justified these efforts in her message of welcome when she said:

“This Conference grew out of a concern on the part of many individuals and agencies that we needed to re-think our concepts in relation to the rights of a child to a permanent, secure and loving home, and to examine the policies and practice surrounding adoption in the light of changing community attitudes and trends.”

Blue ribbon babies

For, more than anything else, this Conference demonstrated that significant numbers of people (social workers, adoptive parents, adopted persons) are concerned about standards of practice and the notions underlying those standards, as they must be applied in a new situation. That new situation is represented by the transition from practice dominated by the placement of “blue ribbon” babies, to an increase in the placement of children with special needs (including older and handicapped children) and the adoption of children from other countries. This transition requires a re-examination, not only of adoption practice in relation to such time hallowed areas as “matching” but also in terms of the relationships between the significant parties. The emergence (in recent years) of articulate, well-organised groups of adoptive and single parents; the presentation of a cogently argued case for a review of the adoption of aboriginal children by white

families; and the possibility of major changes in adoption laws, meant that the timing of the Conference was almost ideal. The bringing together of representatives of **ALL** of the interested parties — lawyers, doctors, social workers, adopters, adoptees, single parents, aborigines, etc., provided a unique opportunity to begin taking stock before setting priorities for the future.

Keynote address:

The keynote address: “Adoption in a Changing Society”, was given by Jane Rowe, Director of the Association of British Adoption Agencies, and an internationally acknowledged authority on adoption policy and practice. This paper foreshadowed most of the dominant themes of the Conference. It represented a moving, sensitive appraisal of the adoption scene in Britain and the USA, yet one which confronted the audience with the reality faced by children, those who seek to adopt them and those who are the intermediaries. In a survey of the changing patterns of policy and practice over the last half century, Jane Rowe discussed changes in sexual behaviour and parenthood, the revolution in the social situation of women and the increase in concern for personal rights. Referring to children’s rights, she quoted the Director of the Child Welfare League of America:

“Children need what they need when they need it; providing it later is always too late.”

The core of the paper dealt with the urgent needs of the “children who wait” — the older children whose needs have been hitherto obscured by the availability of babies for adoption. In Britain alone there are more than 6,000 children in public care who could benefit from adoption or long-term foster-care. Many of these of course, are handicapped and Jane Rowe pointed out that agencies would need to provide better follow up and supportive services to families caring for them.

The Conference programme provided a rich variety of material divided between plenary sessions, and task, interest and workshop groups covering inter-country adoption, children with special needs, legislation, adoption practice, the adoption of aboriginal children, infertility, A.I.D., medical aspects, etc. The limitations of space enable me to refer only to two of these.

The Conference was fortunate to have Kay Donley, Director of the Spaulding For Children Organisation (Michigan, USA) as the other principal speaker from overseas. In a lively and witty address she outlined the work of her organisation which is concerned solely with the placement of older children with special needs. She spelled out the clear and unequivocal challenge that this approach represents to what we might call traditional adoption practice. In advocating a more aggressive risk-taking approach, Kay Donley took up Jane Rowe's theme that adoption is about children who need families. The Spaulding programme shows clearly that these families can be found for children formerly considered unadoptable.

“Highlight”

For me the other Conference highlight was the contribution of the representatives of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. In many ways this group was the best organised and had the clearest view in terms of objectives. If at times they overstated their case it was because of the passion of their beliefs and the realisation that here was an opportunity to engage in dialogue with the adoption “establishment” on equal terms. Many Aborigines went away from the Conference feeling that they had at last been given a hearing on what is for them a matter of deep emotional significance. All those who are concerned about the social circumstances of Aborigines and their attitudes to the adoption of their children by white families would do well to study the report of their working party in the forthcoming Conference Proceedings.



Children by adoption?
Refugee Centre Bangladesh.

Photo Graham Gregory —

The Proceedings will contain all of the major papers and many of the shorter papers used to stimulate discussion in the smaller groups. In all they represent an important overview of current theory and practice in adoption and its related disciplines in Australia.

“Benefits”

What are the likely benefits from the Conference? Apart from the many significant and lasting relationships formed during six days of hard work, it is already possible to see Conference recommendations being translated into action. Several States have held, or are organising, local follow up conferences; new pressure groups are forming and adoption practice is being scrutinised in the light of new insights and challenges. In addition, Aboriginal groups in Victoria have established an Aboriginal Child

Placement Agency. (Further information can be obtained from Mrs M. Dyer, 173 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, Victoria. 3065)

Above all, the Conference has stimulated widespread discussion about the fundamental issues in adoption policy and practice in Australia. Hopefully this discussion will result in the implementation of some of the following recommendations presented to the final session.

