

The Changing Face of Adoption

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Over the last 25 years, there has been tremendous change in the contexture of adoption in Canada. A couple seeking to adopt a healthy baby today will encounter a more painful wait and struggle than a couple in 1970 did. At the same time, the barrier of secrecy and isolation which historically existed between adopted children and their birth parents is slowly eroding. What are the reasons for these changes and what are society's new laws?

Each year it becomes more difficult for Canadian couples to find children for adoption. "Between 1981 and 199) the number of children placed in adoptive homes across Canada declined from 5,376 per year to 2,836 ~ a decline of almost 50%. Social commentators and statisticians are quick to suggest three factors responsible for this trend: a declining birth rate; increased availability of abortion; and an increase in single mothers keeping their babies.

In 1997, many couples anxious to find adoptable children are looking overseas. China, with its one child per couple policy, is a common source for children. So too are India, Romania and the former Yugoslavia. There has been a Substantial rise in foreign adoptions. In 1970, Immigration Canada recorded fewer than ten international adoptions; since 1991 there have been more than 2,000 annually. Private adoption agencies often arrange these adoptions. Some agencies charge Canadian couples

up to : \$15,000 per adoption and many couples pay gratuities to the foreign orphanage as well. Not without foundation, some observers see international adoptions as a widening enterprise vulnerable to misuse. Developing countries fear that their children may become commodities purchased from their mothers and exported from their homelands. Consequently, in February 1997, Canada ratified an international convention which attempts to prevent the "abduction, sale and trafficking in children." Provincial governments are gradually establishing departments that monitor the propriety of all foreign adoptions within their borders.

Another legal change in adoption relates to the secrecy between adopted children and their biological parents. In most Canadian provinces, a sacred privacy is established when a baby is given for adoption. The child receives a new birth certificate that does not identify the biological parents. The provincial adoption agency controls the adoption records and only discloses the information in later years to the child or biological parent if both parties approach the government for this information. Diverse interest groups support this type of privacy arrangement even today. For example, many adoptive parents want to preserve the family bond that adoption creates; they fear that revealing biological parents to adopted children threatens this bond. Additionally, some antiabortion groups believe more women will choose abortion if the mother's identity is not protected. Finally, government bureaucrats See Mountains of work arise if they must declassify and organize decade-old adoption records. British Columbia recently passed legislation which radically liberalizes the rules of disclosure between adopted children and their biological parents. The government in that province believes that it is at the forefront; in November 1996, the rovince's minister for children, Penny Priddy, stated that B. C. had the "best adoption legislation in North

America” and that it was “on a par with New Zealand and New South Wales in Australia.” As of 1997, all B.C. adoption records are open to parents and children unless one of them files a veto preventing disclosure. This form of disclosure by default is a significant departure from the wall of secrecy which existed in the past. Many support this change in attitude; they propound an adopted child’s fundamental right to know. As well, adopted children have legitimate medical reasons for wanting to know their parents’ identity and medical history.

Foreign adoptions and parent-child disclosure are two modern changes to adoption in Canada. These changes have a reason: most couples cannot find Canadian children available for adoption; and the public is demanding an end to secrecy between adopted children and their biological parents. In response, politicians have made laws to regulate these changes. Many adoption issues are, however, still unresolved; these include Indian bands’ claims of a special interest in children from their communities and maternity/paternity leave for adopting parents. Undoubtedly, the next 25 years will see further changes to adoption in Canada.