**Tougher Adoption Laws Are Needed to Thwart Internet Baby Sales**

Child Abuse, 2006

From Opposing Viewpoints in Context

Ian Lamming is a staff writer for the Northern Echo , a British newspaper.

Floating in cyberspace, somewhere between the shiny new cars and the limited edition hardback books, are countless children, displaced, homeless and some for sale.

Their little faces stare appealingly from colourful websites, like fluffy kittens and puppies in the pet shops before Christmas.

"This handsome boy is ready for his forever family," states one. "Love at first sight," it adds, rather inappropriately given the child is obviously cross-eyed. "This little guy loves to play ... If you know anyone interested in this little man contact ..." The little man is two, the little man has no name, the little man has only a number.

More disturbing still are the older children up for grabs. They have learning difficulties, behavioural problems, medical disorders, many the result of their up-bringing so far, one whose problems began in the womb, thanks to an alcoholic mother.

It's a simple process to begin. Just type in the web address. The surfer is then given the opportunity to choose the sex, age, race and colour, location, level of intelligence and emotional, medical and physical disability of the child they're after. Whatever the moral perspective, the dotcom sites make sad reading, a testament to a world where too many children are suffering. ...

More than 1,700 children have been adopted from 63 countries in all [between 1994 and 2001]; almost half have come from China.

But it's the case of Alan and Judith Kilshaw, of Buckley, North Wales, who gazumped [swindled] another adoptive couple and fled America with twins Kimberley and Belinda, that has set the world reaching for its soapboxes, debating the rights and the wrongs of buying humans on the Net.

It's an issue that has political rivals Tony Blair and William Hague in rare agreement in the House of Commons, and legislation tightening controls over parents adopting abroad is being rushed through.

Felicity Collier, chief executive of the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), says the practice demonstrates why private adoption is illegal in the UK. "We often hear criticisms by prospective adopters about the checks which are carried out before adoptive parents are considered suitable and comparisons are made far too often with the ease with which people can adopt in the US," she says.

"But children have a right to live in secure and loving families. Adults do not have an automatic right to adopt. It is totally unacceptable to BAAF that children are sold to the highest bidder. It is vital that people who wish to adopt from overseas take proper advice before they enter such a minefield."

It's a view echoed in County Durham. Head of services for children and their families, Ken Black, says: "I think it is very worrying that human life can be traded on the Internet at all.

"You wonder what is going to happen to these children later. Will they go through life thinking they could be snatched back?"

Money aside, there are other problems associated with adopting abroad. It is easier than in this country, where the system has been attacked for being too tortuous, too stringent, too restrictive.

But experts here claim background checks overseas on adoptive parents are not rigorous enough, leaving the children vulnerable to possible abuse.

Foreign countries have also been too quick to have children adopted in cases of state emergency, such as war and disaster. Children have found themselves being sent to new homes abroad when their parents are perhaps still alive.

"With inter-country adoption there's the concern that you are taking them away from their cultural roots," says Mr Black. "Often in countries in turmoil insufficient work is done to see whether they are orphans or have just been separated from their parents. So this is something that needs to be regulated carefully."

Adopting foreign children and bringing them to Britain can leave youngsters struggling with their identities. During their early years they don't realize they are different from their parents. Then school years can be particularly cruel and difficult as they try to come to terms with their backgrounds.

"Seeing the Romanian children in their orphanages must have been very hard for couples who didn't have children," says Mr Black. "I've no objection to inter-country adoption as long as it is done properly and legally. But buying children is a different thing."

There's no doubt that some couples wanting to have children are driven by a desperate need, a force which won't wait for the lengthy legal processes in this country and ultimately sends some abroad.

"We do need to speed up the adoption process here and make it clearer and more transparent," says Mr Black.

"There are people who have waited a long time, there are children to be adopted and the process moves too slowly. But there are new Government guidelines on adoption which the professionals working in the field support. And the Prime Minister wants to focus on not being so rigid on age, or whether the parents smoke, for instance."

Things are changing, and more quickly than adoptive parents have experienced in the past. So whatever the moral arguments surrounding the Internet children, some good may yet come out of the system.

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