

Adoption: Changing Families, Changing Times

FOREWORD

It is not so very long ago that adoption rarely commanded the attention of newspapers, the public and politicians. A quarter of a century ago the main item of public interest was whether local authorities and voluntary agencies should take up the American idea of advertising children for adoption. Even among professionals at that time the debate about same-race placements was still to get off the ground. The Conservative Government's White Paper, *Adoption – The Future* (Department of Health, 1963) did not get very far past publication and initial discussion. Then professional interest in change was unmatched by political will. There are, though, occasional small hills of attention to observe when looking back on this rather flat landscape of public discourse. But why and how the mood has changed so dramatically to make adoption almost a constant subject of media, public and political interest is both part of the discussion in this book and the book's *raison d'être*.

Hence the need for what we believe is an unusual and even, we would suggest, a unique book about adoption. It is one that strongly features professional and practice concerns but it is also one that places the whole of its subject within the context not only of public policy but also of the political debate that has informed it. But it is also a book which brings together a wide range of interests and voices, offering differing and different perspectives – not only professionals, academics and practitioners but also birth and adoptive parents, and adopted people; those who have been rejected as adopters and those who have happy, as well as unhappy adoptions. We cannot fully understand adoption – its importance, its professional and public interest – without taking account of and hearing all those who are party to it. To give some shape to the different issues, the varying aspects and the sometimes contrasting viewpoints, we have divided the contributions into sections and have written our own introductions to offer context.

Given the diversity of social work law and practice even in a small country like the UK – the more so with the coming of devolution – it is wise to mention that almost all references in this book are to English legislation and development (which for our purposes is effectively law for England and Wales). Even the legal recognition of adoption took place at different times in the four countries which make up the UK and the rate of change is sometimes different. For example, as the Adoption and Children Act, which covers England and Wales, was proceeding toward the Royal Assent, the review of adoption by the Scottish Executive was still under way. We have included a chapter on New Zealand and there are references in the book to countries overseas, most notably by June Thoburn in her chapter, as well as by those contributors who write about adoption of children from other countries. However, to attempt to cover each country of the UK separately would have made the book cumbersome and to qualify each reference to adoption with a

statement that it applied only to England and Wales (where it did) would have made it tedious. We ask our readers' indulgence.

It is our intention, too, that this book should not only be of interest to professionals and those directly concerned with adoption but also to a wider audience. Adoption is tricky: this is all too apparent from some of our contributors. Equally, even for those families where adoption seems to cause no problems, it is a demanding task. In some countries, as is noted, adoption it is culturally unacceptable or takes a very different shape from what it does in the UK, the qualifying paragraph above notwithstanding. This needs to be explored and understood. Too much adoption policy is shaped by ignorance at worst and misunderstanding at best. The reforms that have now been enacted by the present government were necessary but they have not always been well informed either in ministerial comment, parliamentary debate or by those who have sought to influence the legislation. We hope that this book goes some way to clarifying and explaining the issues through the words of those who best know the difficulties and satisfactions of seeking to give a child a better life.

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Introduction and Overview

It is not so long ago that adoption was seen as an obvious solution to the problems facing some children. They came from “bad” homes or were orphaned or abandoned. Thus, went the argument, as love healed and restored and repaired loss, if such children could only be matched with “good” families, all would be well. In fact, so potent was the idea that unsatisfactory pasts and even memories could be wiped out, that some of the children were not told they were adopted. Indeed, adopted children were often referred to as “special” or “chosen”, to distinguish them from other children.

But matters were never really so straightforward and are even less so today. Politicians and the media sometimes present adoption as a simple matter of matching the right (loving) adoptive parents with the right (needy) child. While most adoptions work well, no adoption is simple.

Nearly all of us know someone who is either adopted, adopting, or trying to adopt. Eight hundred thousand people in the UK have been adopted and it is

reckoned that there are several million others who are affected by adoption – adoptive parents, siblings and other family members, as well as birth parents and birth relatives. Adoption is “a subject about which most people have information.” (Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby, 1997)

While adoption became legal in England and Wales only as recently as 1926, it is still very much an Anglo-Saxon institution – a fact which British policy makers sometimes lose sight of. In some European countries (as June Thorburn tells us in chapter 5) there is virtually no adoption. In the United States 14 per cent of adoptions are by relatives, whereas most adopters in Britain are people previously unknown to the child. Adoption policy mirrors geopolitics. Britain is not as individualistic as the US, but care is less institutionalised than much of Europe.

The statistics and technical facts of adoption are easy to recount. In 2000 3,420 children were adopted in England. This was a record and compares with the 3,125 adopted in the year ending March 2000, 2,880 in 1999 and 2,410 in 1998. Three out of four children are adopted from care; the remainder are step-parent adoptions. Adoption follows a court order, which permanently removes all birth parent responsibilities for a child, and transfers full legal rights and responsibilities to an adoptive parent or parents. A child should only be adopted after every effort has been made to protect the child's most precious right – to live happily and safely with its own parent or parents.

We now recognise that adoption can no longer be seen as a surgical break with the birth family and the past. Adopted children have histories which they are entitled to know, and which, in some cases, possibly with professional help, they need to come to terms with. We no longer imagine that being able to adopt the child you have always wanted is without difficulties, or that giving up a child for adoption ends any entitlement of the birth parent to future involvement. Open adoptions, in which contact between the birth parent and child, or between siblings placed with different carers, continues throughout an adoption, are on the increase but still fairly rare. More often than not, they remain fraught emotionally and practically.

Three hundred years ago in the UK, babies were abandoned or murdered if they were unwanted. Indeed they still are in many countries like China today. Adoption was rarely heard of in Britain, although the healthy babies of some poor mothers were sold to wealthy childless couples. Legalisation in England and Wales came 75 years after the first laws in America in 1851. American society was built upon displaced children and families coming together to start new lives. Britain, on the other hand, was late in accepting there were alternatives to strong blood ties, and even the first Adoption Act in 1926 did not allow adopted children to inherit from their new parents.

Adoption in some shape or form has taken place in every human society and culture. In ancient Athens, adoption, particularly of boys who were trained to perform religious ceremonies, flourished as early as the 4th century AD. Since 1926, over 800,000 children have been adopted in Britain. Up until then, private arrangements were normal, organised by a rogue's gallery of

intermediaries. Just as it has been throughout history, the majority of birth parents giving their children up for adoption are unmarried and not in paid work, whereas 95 per cent of adopters are likely to be married, middle class couples with at least one income from a permanent job, and more often than not two.

While trafficking in babies no longer takes place within the UK, it continues as a thriving trade internationally. Thousands of Nepalese girls are trafficked every year into India as child prostitutes. When Nadezdha Fratti, a Russian/Italian was arrested in Volgograd, Southern Russia in 2000, she was suspected of having arranged the illegal adoption in Italy of up to 600 children, mostly babies, during the 1990's. She was paid about £1700 per child. Fratti is one of many international profiteers who operate as lawyers or adoption brokers. Buyer-led private adoptions are common in the United States, where adoption is comparatively unregulated. In the UK, adopting from abroad can be expensive, with costs ranging from £2000 for an independent study of suitability, to a five-figure sum if litigation is involved. The infamous Kilshaws, who lost a legal battle to adopt twin baby girls from the United States in the first major e-adoption case, had their house in North Wales re-possessed after running up legal bills of over £60,000 (Guardian newspaper, 23 October 2001). A commodification of adoption takes place where bargain-hunting private purchasers with a 'name your price' attitude come into contact with poor families, usually poor mothers, who are tempted by the money they can make, even if they exchange short-term income for long-term sadness at the loss of their baby. Scandals happen in the West too. In the 1940's and 1950's, the Tennessee Childrens Home Society in Memphis, USA, arranged the illegal adoption for personal profit of at least 1500 children, in a black market operation orchestrated by its Director, Georgia Tann. (Tollet Austin, 1993)) Until the Kilshaw case in the UK forced the UK Government to make bringing children into the UK without following the correct assessment and approval procedures a criminal offence (Sections 9 and 14 of the Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act 1999), many children in the UK today arrived via this route, and are now growing up adopted all over the country, many of them with little chance of ever finding out the truth about their background. Many, anyway, will have come from countries where records are not available either because they are not advanced bureaucratic states or the ravages of war and civil conflict have destroyed them. Birth, marriage and death records in the Irish Republic went up in flames in 1921 during the siege of the Four Courts in Dublin.

Adopting from abroad is not a contemporary phenomenon, as an excerpt from the leading adoption journal of the time in 1972 shows –'The Adoption Resource Exchange, for the first time this year found itself with a waiting list of adopters wanting to take a child regardless of colour or race. 74 children found homes in 1971 through the ARE, fifty two of them fully or partly Negro, the rest Asian' (Child Adoption, 1972, Vol 3). What is slightly surprising is that this interest by white families in adopting black children came only 3 years after the peak year in the UK for the adoption of children by non-related parents, when 16,000 adoption orders were granted in England and Wales in 1968, three quarters being for babies aged one year and under. Just as

adoptions within countries still transfer the children of poor parents to richer parents, the same shift takes place between countries. In Russia in 1999, there were only 7000 domestic adoptions, a declining number, whilst there were equal numbers of foreign adoptions in the same year, two thirds of the children going to the USA. Within the UK, more than 10,000 unaccompanied children are living with friends, relatives or strangers, having made their way here or having been sent here from abroad. (Kidane, 2001; Philpot, 2001) Some will end up in de facto adoptions. Many, like 15 year old Aslem, who arrived in the UK alone from Afghanistan, miss their homeland: -

"I did not choose to come here

I was sent because of the war.

I would not choose this for anyone" (BAAF press release, 15 November 2001)

The history of adoption has its ugly side in every single country. As a result of investigations into stolen Aboriginal children in Australia, who were taken from their families and placed in church-run missions to rescue or cure them of their aboriginality, child care policy in Australia today is that Aboriginal children being placed in substitute care should be placed within their own culture and community. The *Daily Mail* airlifted over 100 children out of Vietnam at the end of the Vietnam War and brought them to England. Many spent their childhood not happily adopted, but in residential care in the UK. Rescuing as an act of mercy often leads to worse consequences than those originally faced. Above all, many of the children forcibly removed from their homes or homelands dream of either going back or re-establishing contact. One of the Vietnamese children, Minh Lee, now in his thirties, carries around a faded photograph of the sister he left behind in Saigon, who he will never see again. (8) Many countries like Romania and China, which had no child care services of note a decade ago, are now developing family placement services of their own, to the extent that Romania now bans foreign adoptions.

Despite these risks and tragedies, adoption has generally been a successful social policy. Numerous studies over the last 50 years have demonstrated that the outcomes for children in care, especially younger children, are better after adoption than in long-term foster care or residential care, although there was not always a consensus about the distinguishing factors. (A selection of studies are listed at the end of this chapter). As disproportionately more children in care end up homeless, in prison, under psychiatric care, or adrift in the job market without skills and qualifications, it is important to maximise the security and stability a positive adoption can give to children and young people who have suffered a wretched early childhood, which can include being chronically neglected or subjected to long-term physical sexual and emotional abuse. Seventy five per cent of children in long-term care leave school without a single GCSE grade C or above. Fifty per cent of children who have been in care are jobless a year after leaving care. Thirty four per cent of homeless young people are care leavers. Twenty three per cent of the adult prison population have been in the care system. Sixty per cent of male prostitutes have been in care. (Department of Health , 1999). A superficial

reading of the figures about children in care propelled Prime Minister Blair to see adoption as a cure-all.

While statistics always need to be treated with caution, and cannot be generalised to outcomes for individual children, adoption tends to make children feel more stable and secure in a new family, even in a step family. As a friend of one of the editors (Anthony Douglas) wrote about her stepfather after his death, 'Darling Michael, the biggest truth I have realised in all my life in the last 52 years since you adopted me is that you have been the most loving stepfather a child could ever have had.' (Nesbitt, 2001). Step-parent adoptions form a constantly diminishing percentage of all UK adoptions, and there is case for dealing with them administratively in registry offices, rather than judicially. Indeed, when thinking about adoption, it is important to keep in mind the three main types: adopting from care, international adoption and step-family adoption. Their very different characteristics are yet another reason why adoption cannot be seen as straightforward. Nor can those affected be regarded as a homogenous group.

As one in three marriages end in divorce, and as many partners either re-marry or find a new long-term relationship outside marriage, step-parent adoption is a way of binding children from a first marriage into a second. Most step-parent adopters are men, but the total number of step-parent adoptions is tiny compared with the number of unmarried partners living together and bringing up children within a stable long-term relationship.

Most adopters who adopt internationally are child-centred couples, contemplating adoption as a third-best option for family-forming, after discovering they cannot produce children of their own, and in many cases after unsuccessful fertility treatment. It may be that in the future, human cloning will make adoption unnecessary. What would happen then to rejected children? For now, understandably, most couples in this position would prefer to adopt a baby who could be theirs from the word go. Early enquiries soon acquaint would-be adopters with the fact that adoption agencies in the UK, seeking homes for children in the care system, are looking to match children with special needs with parents with special talents. Children will often be older, they may well have a serious disability, or they may be part of a complicated sibling group. Indeed, one of the facts which has altered adoption out of all recognition in a generation is the paucity of babies now available for adoption: - 8,500 in England and Wales in 1970, and in 2000, just 200. As a result, many childless couples decide to adopt a child from abroad.

The third and most complex group of children in the adoption system are children in care. It is their stories that occupy most of our attention as editors of this book. Many of the adopters in our book have adopted children who have waited, or children who have been let down time and time again. Their stories demonstrate both the reality of adoption today, but optimistically, the inescapable conclusion that there are 'parents for children, not children for parents' to be found, if family finders search long, hard and astutely enough. (Fowler, 2001)

Many prospective adopters continue to report that adoption agencies, particularly local authorities, cause unnecessary delays, burden them by paper work and generally act in all kinds of ways that feel either deliberately obstructive or indifferent to the urgency they feel, and the urgency those same prospective adopters feel that children waiting to be adopted will be feeling. Some adopters view adopting from abroad as a faster process which fits in better with their life plans. It is undoubtedly the case that many adopters who go overseas would be willing and able to look after children who need adopting from care, if family finding was dealt with through a co-ordinated national system. The new National Adoption Register will help by building on existing national matching services like the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF's) Be My Parent magazine, which features individual children needing adoptive homes, and which is available nationally. A cautionary note should be struck. Only 25% of the children referred to Be My Parent in the last year ended up being adopted. The remainder stayed in long-term foster care placements or returned to their birth families. As we discuss in more detail later in this chapter, the Government's new adoption targets are unrealistic, unless twice as many adopters can be found.

Professional practice in adoption is often unfairly criticised by those who do not appreciate or accept that potential adopters need to be rigorously assessed, and it may not be possible to match particular adopters with a child who is waiting. This is like a homeless person seeing an empty home and immediately demanding to live in it, oblivious to the fact that there may be other homeless people who have been waiting longer, in greater need, or that the house itself may need underpinning before anyone can live in it again. Such an attitude seems to be based on the curious overlooking of the fact that adoption is a service for children, not one for people who cannot have their own children or wish to add to their family by adopting. But over the last ten years, a number of adoption agencies have joined forces and set up adoption consortia, pooling the children who need a placement and the adopters who are available to take a child, in order to increase the number of matching options.

Ideally, following an assessment that a child needs a permanent substitute family, the child will be freed for adoption legally, a suitable adopter will be identified and thoroughly prepared, including being given all the available information about the child, and the child will be placed without delay, with the placement receiving a high level of post-placement or post-adoption support. In reality, there is a gulf between theory and practice. The assessment process may not be instantly conclusive, in that it is hard to judge whether poor parenting in the past inevitably means parenting will repeat itself if the child returns home. Parents can change, and many do, especially if they are supported as a family after their child returns home, as 8 children out of 10 do. There may well be delays in the court process, either because of timetabling problems or the need for court welfare staff to make a succession of time-consuming enquiries before they can be clear what to advise a magistrate or judge. Complex decisions in other fields take years for courts to determine, and the trend to citizenship gives rights to many parties in a process as complex as adoption. Post-adoption support cannot be funded in some parts

of the country. When things go wrong for a child in care, it is often for a number of reasons, some relating to resources, some to professional practice. That of course is little consolation for those directly involved. Most children and adopters can live with short-term setbacks. What is unforgivable is a delay in the adoption process stretching on for years, so that all involved lose heart and the adoption breaks down. One of the saddest groups of children in the care system are those who have been in care, who have at long last been adopted, and whose adoptions then break down so they end up back in the care system yet again. Adoption breakdown is another fact side-stepped by those who see adoption as a childcare panacea.

Such are some of the facts of adoption. But the comparatively small number of annual adoptions cannot easily explain the disproportionate amount of media, public and political attention which the subject attracts. While Alan Milburn, Secretary of State for Health, has said that too often adoption has been the last resort for children, when it should be the first (Milburn 2001), he knows little of which he speaks. Even if local authorities – who are the main adoption agencies, despite the work in the voluntary sector – were to improve practice more than they have and resources were not a question: there would never be more than 4-5,000 children available for adoption. The prime minister – perhaps, significantly, the son of an adopted father – early on took the lead in seeing adoption as a solution to the needs of children in care and personally chaired the interdepartmental committee which led to the Adoption and Children Act 2001. Yet there are 58,1000 children currently (2002) in the care of local authorities. The overwhelming majority are not, and will never be available for adoption: they are living with their families while subject to a care order, they are in temporary foster homes, they will return to their families or they do not wish to be adopted.

By comparison consider not merely children who live in poverty or, nearer, in practice and policy terms, to adopted children, the 35,000 children who are fostered. The latter get hardly any political, media or public attention at all and the former, while not ignored, get far, far less than their numbers or condition warrant.

No, there are other reasons why adoption commands the attention that it does. True, most adopted people do not consciously think about their situation day to day. For them, for all practical and emotional purposes, their adopted family is their family. Like almost everyone else they get on with their lives, have their achievements and strive to overcome those difficulties which they share with the unadopted majority of the population.

But however much the adopted person goes about their life in much the same way as their unadopted neighbour, there are other, deeper currents at play in the public arena than the simple, laudable wish to provide more children with satisfactory homes. It is not, then, just a matter of how adoption affects the adopted person and their birth and adopted families. At its most profound level, adoption touches something deep in the human psyche. For example, many of us who are not adopted commonly fantasise that we are not the

children of our parents but the lost or abandoned offspring of more romantic figures.

Adoption intersects with notions of the family. The stories of Moses, Oedipus and many a fairy tale give imaginative expression to our preoccupations about origins and identity. Mike Leigh's 1995 film *Secrets and Lies* deals with what is now a common experience (or at least an almost universal consideration) for adopted people – the search for those who gave them birth. There are 800,000 adopted people in Britain, of whom 300,000 have actively engaged in such a search.

This human interest in adoption is witnessed frequently elsewhere in our popular culture. Other films like *Stuart Little* (1999) and *Big Daddy* (2000) cover the complexities of adoption through use of humour and a happy ending, especially for children. P D James' *Innocent Blood* (James, 1980) has a young woman who seeks her adopted mother only to find that she is a murderess. This is a less a thriller making use of the device of adoption as a Jamesian exploration of a now not uncommon human situation. Margaret Forster has written two novels where adoption is at the centre of human drama. The first, *The Battle for Christabel* (Forster 1990) is less about a struggle to adopt, as its title might suggest, as the struggle between contending parties in an adoption case. Her later work, *Shadow Baby* (Forster 1996) concerns the search for roots in the stories of two women, born generations apart but whose childish fates tie them together. Dave Pelzer wrote the best selling trilogy, *A Child Called It*, *The Lost Boy*, and *A Man Named Dave*, based upon a young man who was placed in substitute family care after an early childhood dominated by harrowing abuse. (Pelzer, 1997). Harry Potter is now perhaps the most world's most famous orphan, as well as wizard, of all time. Harry's parents were killed by Voldemort - "he who must not be named" - and Harry was brought up by his cruel aunt and uncle, Mr and Mrs Dursley, who denied him the truth and information about his parents, who he longed for. (Rowling, 1997) But Harry Potter belongs to a long tradition of children's literature and fairy tales where a child or children are separated from their birth parents and placed in substitute families. Family placement is mainstream territory for children's books, like *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (Wilson, 1991) and *Dustbin Baby* (Wilson, 2001)

Thus, into this psychological and cultural cauldron we cast the debates that surround public policy. Public policy, the effects of secrecy and a wish to know who we are coincided tragically in the case of the anonymous man who wrote to *The Guardian*:

My father hated and bullied me, cheated on my mother for years (as she did on him), and gambled and drank us into misery. I left the family as soon as I could, keeping in touch only with my sister. When I was 40, my sister told me what everybody had known but me: he wasn't my father... Knowing I have been lied to all my life is unendurable. I can't believe anything about myself any more. I'm not interested in tracing my "real" family; I just want to know I'm worth the truth. My motives aren't purely selfish. The illness that forced my retirement from work has appeared in

my son, and I am terrified in case it's inherited from my unknown father.
(Guardian, 1 June 2001)

Individual rights is one of the key themes now affecting how social policy and adoption in particular develops. A single adoption is often a battleground between competing rights. Fifty years ago, birth parents had far fewer rights than today, as did relatives like grandparents. Today, the child, one or two birth parents, relatives from the child's extended family, potential adopters and a local authority acting in loco parentis, may all have rights but may not all agree on what is in the best interests of a particular child. In many ways it is remarkable that in over 40 per cent of state-sponsored adoptions, all parties involved do end up agreeing. Contested adoptions can be extremely tricky for courts to determine. It is that trickiness that often leads to delays in making a final Adoption Order, or indeed in reaching a final decision that a child should return home because life there is much improved. The government wishes to speed up the adoption process for children in the care system, but this assumes that competing rights can be assessed, resolved and decided, often judicially, within a few months. Children, of course, should not wait a day longer than is necessary for a permanent home to be found. The reality is also that adoption agencies have staff shortages and their own competing pressures. While the ideal is for every stage in the process to move quickly and smoothly without undue delay, there are no short cuts in adoption work. Rushing into the wrong placement is as catastrophic as a delay in finding the right one. The consequences can be lifelong, either way.

Adoption law reform comes in periodic waves about once every quarter of a century, each time following a movement for change led by key professional and academic figures. 1926, 1948, 1976 and now 2002, are the key dates in the calendar, although, it can be argued that the latest changes came as a result of media and political pressure more than professional energy. Changes consulted about for the Adoption and Children Act 2002 included proposals to simplify the court process, and to introduce stronger performance measures for local authorities, including a target of increasing adoptions from care by 40-50 per cent in the next three to four years (2001), a target greeted at the outset with incredulity by adoption professionals, especially as the number of care orders made by courts in England rose to 6,299 in the year 2000, from 4,124 in the previous year, an unprecedented leap of 52.7 per cent. (Lord Chancellors Department, 2001)

Whatever satisfactions today's policy makers and agitators in parliament may gain from the new reforms, they are, in many ways, about numbers. This is not to neglect that fact – if the numbers of satisfactory placements rise that will be a greater number of children with the possibility of a better life. However, the decade which saw the most radical, influential and long-lasting reforms was the 1970s. Here adoption came into its own in the UK. Academics like Roy Parker of Bristol University first pressed publicly for permanency planning for children in long-term care, seeking a fundamental shift away from residential care to family care as the main placement option for children in care. Other countries like the USA also had their own strong permanency movement around this time. Thirty years later, that vision has

come about with over 70 per cent of children in care in the UK now placed with families, either through fostering or adoption. Organisations like Parents for Children, whose chief executive Karen Irving writes a contribution to this book, was set up in 1976 by two sets of parents who had themselves adopted children. "Their radical idea was to bring together the two groups missed by the adoption system: children considered unadoptable, and families turned away because they were too old, single parents or who didn't meet some of the other criteria." (interview in the Highbury and Islington Express, 20 April 2001)

It is unfortunate that we do not hear more from successful adopters and happily placed children, although an increasing number of personal stories are appearing on the internet. Rejected adoption applicants get far more air and screen time and column inches. As Martin Amis says:

We live in the age of mass loquacity. We are all writing it or at any rate talking about it: the memoir, the apologia, the c.v., the *cri de coeur*. Nothing, for now, can compete with experience... We are surrounded by special cases, by special pleadings, in an atmosphere of universal celebrity...It's not the case that in the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. In the future, everyone will be famous all the time - but only in their own minds. (Amis, 2000)

We live in an age of self-revelation, angst and emotional chaos. Newspaper columns are full of individual's life stories condensed into a few hundred words, many of them famous. The comedian Jim Davidson has talked widely about his adoption, and his search for identity through various marriages, always searching for the right woman - his mother? At least one of those relationships was alleged to have been violent, perhaps as each adult relationship failed to match up to his impossible expectations. (Sunday People, 21 October 2001). John Lennon employed private detectives and used the media extensively in a search for his sister, who was relinquished for adoption at birth. They never met (Mullender, 1999). Bill Clinton and Marilyn Monroe were adopted. Louis Emerick, who plays Mick Johnson in the long running Channel 4 soap *Brookside*, and who was also adopted, said:

I only discovered I was adopted when I was 11. I had always assumed that I had come out of my mother's womb. I tortured myself as to why my mother gave me away as a baby. I traced my birth mother and met her at Lime Street Station in Liverpool. I grew to understand why she gave me away. She was a single mother with a mixed race baby. In the 1950s, that just wasn't accepted. I would have been brought up in a predominantly white area of Merseyside - and who knows how tough that might have been. I wouldn't have been the person I am now, with a father whom I worship - who is now my hero. She thought she was doing the right thing, and in retrospect, I think she did. (Hello magazine, 2 October 2001)

All adoptions, however happy, leave a residue of confusion and doubt. The most important issue is to understand your past and to come to terms with it.

But it is just these personal stories and, most of all, those of people who have been rejected as adoptive parents, which have fuelled the belief that social services departments are infected by political correctness, that they allow children to languish, unnecessarily, in care, and that they give adoption a low priority. In short, such stories, retailed by newspapers and politicians, have given credence to the idea that adoption is a simple matter of finding the right child for the right family – and, as so many couples have been (allegedly) unfairly rejected, that far, far more children could be rescued from care.

Right wing commentators like Patricia Morgan contend “that political correctness drives current adoption practice: that prospective adopters are disqualified for spurious reasons; that social workers are dogmatic about trans-racial adoption; and that inadequate parenting of the poor is tolerated because of a misguided cocktail of parental rights and family preservation policies.” (Connor – DATE TO COME) Commentators from the opposite end of the political spectrum contend that transracial placements are nearly always bad for children, even in the absence of a viable same race alternative. Black issues have remained an uneasy and unresolved undercurrent of adoption policy and practice in the UK for the last 25 years, with practitioners often taking an opposite and less populist point of view to politicians. This in turn has left adoption social workers and managers trapped in the middle of a stark and often uncompromising debate. Black children in care have clearly benefited over the last 20 years by the greater availability of same race placements, especially as racism in many UK communities shows no sign of easing, even if the form it takes and those it involves changes.

Adoption seems to affect politicians more powerfully than most social issues, on a personal level. British Prime Ministers like John Major and Tony Blair have taken up the cudgel, often through personally knowing disaffected potential adopters who were turned down by local authorities or who were trying to adopt from overseas and who felt they were subject to a form of character assassination by social workers. Politicians and the media continue to promote illiberal adoption politics, which usually consists of praising inter-country adopters and haranguing gays and lesbians who might wish to adopt. Any social worker will tell you that some children, like girls who have been sexually abused by their fathers or male partners of their mothers, prefer a same sex placement. Myth and reality are often wildly unrelated when adoption is politicised, nowhere more strongly than in reactions to gay and lesbian adoption. (Holloway, 2002)

Adoption law and policy moves in a conservative way, compared to the wider social changes in family life over the last half century. Our book seeks to describe adoption from the perspectives of the key participants in the process: people who have been adopted, practitioners, birth parents, those who have adopted, managers of services and others. Our contributors speak with unique and often powerful voices, frequently borne out of deep experience. Like them, as editors, we offer insights – not all of which coincide - rather than solutions to the dilemmas adoption today poses. We hope we have managed to convey both the benefits and the drawbacks of adoption to a general

readership as well as to those already playing a part in the adoption community in one role or another.

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