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A PERSONAL WALK AROUND ADOPTION AND SOCIAL WORK BEFORE THE ADOPTION ACT 1976

Now in my mid-seventies, I wonder if I am in the unique position of having experienced adoption from both a personal and professional point of view before the Adoption Act 1976, let alone the Adoption and Children Act 2002, came into force. Our adoptive daughter and her partner have recently been accepted by an adoption panel as prospective adopters. During the process, I was struck by the huge differences in our experiences, and by the difficulties the social workers had in understanding the context and how the system functioned pre-1976.

I started my social work career in 1964 as a child care officer in a Children's Department. Later, I worked as a medical social worker, specialising in the maternity and children's wings and, later still, I worked as a generic social worker, and finally as a children's guardian. Almost all of my career has involved contact with birth parents, adopters and children placed for adoption.

In the 1960s, the search for adopters, in the area where I worked, was dominated by the religious-based adoption societies and the birth mothers were mainly dealt with by the moral welfare societies. The vast majority of the children placed were relinquished babies. Most of the, mainly young, mothers were accommodated in mother and baby homes, where they lived prior to the birth, and were then faced with caring for their child in the Home for six weeks, until they could sign the preliminary consent form, after which the child would be transferred to the care of the prospective adopters.

This situation is now the subject of an enquiry currently before Parliament, looking at the pressures brought to bear on, mostly single, mothers to give up their babies for adoption. There have been some harrowing accounts of how badly these mothers were treated both in hospital and in the mother and baby homes, and there is a call for an apology to be made to them. Whilst I do not doubt the validity of these experiences, I did not encounter any such attitudes in the professionals with whom I worked.

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