

The baby trade

By ROSEMARY WEST

NEAR the centre of the Chilean capital, Santiago, is a tourist hotel with a difference, the El Conquistador. The name is a legacy of the earliest European visitors, who came to South America in search of treasure, and in the process destroyed the ancient civilisations of those to whom they meant to bring salvation.

The modern visitors to the Hotel El Conquistador come in search of another treasure: children. This is where Mrs Dallice Robins, 46, is loyally battling to care for a six-week-old baby she regards as her grandson, while her daughter and son-in-law are back in Melbourne in a belated and desperate bid to win the Department of Community Services' approval for the adoption.

Her daughter and son-in-law, Belinda and Graham Willoughby, went to Chile, and to the Hotel El Conquistador, with the support of Graeme Orr, a Melbourne public relations man who operates a private adoption advice and counselling group or groups variously called the Adoption Option Collective, Adoption Option International, the Australian Adoption Council and most recently the Intercountry Adoption Agency.

He makes a practice of helping couples to find children overseas and bring them into the country often without the

legally required approval of the state adoption authorities. He claims to have assisted with 140 of these back-door adoptions.

Graeme Orr heard of the Hotel El Conquistador from another adoptive couple when he went with his wife Carol to Chile in 1983 for his own back-door adoption. He had approached the Victorian department, but found that he could not be assessed until he had been married for three years. By then his wife would have been over 40, too old according to Victorian adoption standards to adopt an infant. Although the Ors went to Chile in search of a baby, they came away with an eight-year-old girl.

He says the hotel is attractive to adopters because the rooms are large and a discount is offered to them.

But some Australians who have gone there to adopt have come away concerned about other aspects of the service offered. One couple said that a man came to their door at midnight and told them there was a baby ready and to have all their documents and payments ready within four hours. They returned without adopting, and complained to their state department.

One reason state authorities are wary of dealing with Chile is the reports of adoption rackets in that country. One racket, reported in the Chilean press last year, involved a judge, a social worker and a lawyer who were working together to coerce women into giving up their children for inter-country adoption.

Another is that the official Chilean agency with which the states have been dealing will not permit the adoption of

children under the age of two, because they believe their children are better off adopted in their own country and they want Chilean couples to have the first opportunity to adopt.

The Queensland children's services director last year cited stories of Chilean mothers sobbing as Australian parents arrived at maternity hospitals to collect their newborn babies.

The Willoughbys went to Chile after a phone call from one of Graeme Orr's contacts to say that a baby was ready. But by the time they got there, the baby's father had turned up and said he did not want his child adopted, they were told.

They waited three weeks and were given a three-month-old baby girl, whom they named Karina. They were told her mother had left her with a priest, who by coincidence was the parish priest of their solicitor. But five days later, her mother changed her mind.

Belinda Willoughby says they could have fought this in court, but were advised not to. "That would be a terrible thing to live with," she said. "We thought we would die. That's why it's making us fight all the harder for our son." They were given Lucas another month later, when he was three days old.

Graeme Orr now says he did not advise the Willoughbys to adopt outside the system. "They made their own decision." He just gave the information and the contacts, he says. Yet the letterhead of the Intercountry Adoption Agency promises "adoption advice and counselling", and a circular offers advice and assistance "for a professional fee".

Nor, he says, did he advise them to come to Victoria. (Their application to adopt through the NSW Youth and Community Services Department three years ago had failed because Belinda Willoughby's life expectancy was reduced by diabetes). "Some couples ask me 'What about moving to Victoria?'" he said. "I say, 'That's your decision.'" (An administrative loophole had made it easier for unapproved couples to bring children into Victoria than other states, until the Minister for Community Services, Mrs Hogg, changed the guidelines last week.) Yet another circular, referring to couples who may be eligible in some states but not their own, says "We shuffle them to other states..."

Graeme Orr says that for a year now he has been telling people to go to the department first, and that most do. But, he says, "We aid people who have been told they won't be assessed" mostly due to their age or because they are single. And he plans to continue. "We will explain that Mrs Hogg has said they won't get approval (for a visa) and we support that: what we don't support is that this will knock out quality parents." He will not say on record whether he thinks unapproved adopters will really be stopped by the Victorian change.

He says the problem with the Willoughbys was that the "people in Chile rang them first and then rang me. A lot of people make the decision and they're not very often willing to rescind it". To Belinda Willoughby, what seems unfair is that so many others have got in without any trouble. She recalls at least half a dozen adopters who came and went through the Hotel El Conquistador while she and her husband were there, including a single mother from New South Wales and a 64-year-old Victorian husband. None of them was approved, she says.

"I know they are making an example of us," she says. "I think if people see what we're going through, there's no way they would do what we did." Belinda Willoughby says there was no indication that this might happen. "They had never stopped anybody before." But what about the unapproved South Australian couple, who were refused a visa for a 20-month-old baby girl they wanted to adopt and were stranded in Santiago for three weeks until the Government relented on compassionate grounds? "But they got home," she says. "Nobody had to come back without their baby."

Perhaps there would always have been someone caught with their foot in the door, whenever it was closed.

Last week, there was a good deal of concern, anger even, among people involved in authorised adoptions that by failing to close that door earlier, Mrs Hogg was encouraging people like the Willoughbys to flout the system. "She has to take responsibility... We've been telling the minister's office for three months that this would happen," said one adoptive parent.

But now that she has taken this stand, the adoption community has closed ranks about her and there is not a word of criticism. They are reserving the blame for Graeme Orr and his Intercountry Adoption Agency.

Caroline Hogg herself has adopted children, and it has been widely rumored that she was an intercountry

adoptive parent who had gone outside the system to adopt. To this she points out that both her children were locally born and adopted through the department. She denies any conflict of interest, and says her position is the same as if she were Minister for Education, and had a child at school.

In contrast with the vitriolic way he attacked her predecessor, Pauline Toner — he once called her the 'Monster for Community Services' — Graeme Orr now presents himself as a staunch supporter of Mrs Hogg. She is, he says, the best thing since sliced bread. He was approved to adopt last August by International Social Services, and plans to travel overseas later this year for an older child, probably to Chile.

A STATEMENT issued on Friday by a group of three adoptive parents and a researcher in the field of intercountry adoption said Mrs Hogg's assertion that her department and International Social Service are the only authorised, inter-country adoption agencies, "should alert prospective adopters to the dangers of flirting with self-appointed crusaders. In particular we deplore the activities of Graeme Orr and his associates".

The group, which includes the author and researcher Cliff Picton and adoptive parents Rosemary Calder, Glenys Gayfer and Keith Wallace, has asked Mrs Hogg "to take all possible steps to warn prospective adopters that he (Mr Orr) does not have any official standing or support".

Terry O'Brien, the principal adoption officer at the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau and chairman of the Victorian Standing Committee on Adoption and Alternative Families, an umbrella group of adoption agencies and self-help groups, came out more strongly.

He criticised Graeme Orr for presenting his group as an agency as being "inappropriate and misleading to the public... He must accept some responsibility for the plight this family now finds itself in".

Graeme Orr was also involved with the South Australian couple who were stranded last year. At the time the Acting

Minister for Community Welfare, Dr John Cornwall, singled out Mr Orr and his 'agency' for criticism.

The Chilean connection was also the subject of a ministerial statement in Queensland last year when a crackdown on unapproved adoptions was announced in that state. The Queensland children's services director, Graham Zerk, said in a newspaper article he had been told Chilean lawyers had been trying to solicit more business through couples with Chilean babies. "Here we are so scrupulous to make sure a mother who gives up her baby is not under threat... Consent for adoption can be taken only after extensive counselling to the mother," he said. "She then has 30 days to change her mind. We have no guarantee this has gone on with Chilean mothers if it is a deal arranged privately."

Marie Meggit, coordinator of the Association of Relinquishing Mothers, says Third World women are now giving up their children for the same reasons — poverty and prejudice — that induced her to do so when she was 17. "By going there, adopters are creating pressures on local women," she said. "How many of them will come to believe that the decision was wrong for them and possibly for their children, because they have lost their culture?"

There is some suspicion that the Pinochet regime may be using intercountry adoption as a means of disposing of the children of jailed dissidents. A 12-year-old girl who was brought to Australia in 1980 by unapproved adopters told friends her earliest memory was of her father jumping out of the window of her family home in Chile, while someone, possibly a policeman, was calling out at the door. She was then placed in a government orphanage with her two brothers, and told that her father was "a very bad man" and that her mother was in a mental institution.

The girl's Australian adoptive parents separated before the adoption was finalised, and neither would care for her. She has spent the past three years in Victorian children's homes, while social workers helped her to decide what to do next. She has recently decided to seek

another Australian adoptive family through the Community Services Department's special needs unit.

The oldest of the adoptive parent groups, the Australian Society for Intercountry Aid (Children), began before there was official provision for intercountry adoption, and has been critical of government tardiness. But now the group works closely with the Government and is concerned about unapproved adoptions, because, members say, from experience they know that these are more likely to have problems or break down.

ANOTHER unapproved adoption ended tragically in a Geelong court last year, when the adoptive mother was put on three years probation for ill-treating the child. The woman, an Australian married to a Fijian, told the court that under a Fijian custom a blood relative could give a child to a childless couple. The judge was reported to have said, "the real crime in this case was allowing the Fiji custom to be extended to allow this little boy into a strange place and put into the custody of a woman who would never have been considered a possible adopting parent in her own country".

But these considerations do not distract Graeme Orr from his grand plan to empty the orphanages of the world. Last week, through the newspaper letters pages he was "seeking parents for children in dire need of families and who are presently languishing in overseas orphanages and institutions".

The letter, on behalf of the Intercountry Adoption Agency, went on to seek "people, married or single, who have the best interests of the child at heart and who are willing to assist our effort to liberate the unwanted children of the world out of institutions and into families... The process is arduous, frustrating and sometimes expensive..."

Graeme Orr claims his real interest is in placing children in need of families, mostly aged from two to nine. He has a dozen on his books that he cannot place. Unfortunately, he says, most couples seek infants. This is why he values single

adopters: they will take children with severe malnutrition or learning difficulties, "the children couples won't touch". But they are not approved to adopt in most states, except in special circumstances.

Much of the criticism of the Intercountry Adoption Agency centres on the use of that name, when it is not authorised to carry out adoptions. For this reason an application to join the standing committee was rejected last year, although Mr Orr has joined as an individual.


When it formed last January, it announced it would seek incorporation and registration as an approved agency; and it has occasionally claimed to be incorporated. But this path now appears to be blocked. An application to incorporate under the Associations Incorporation Act was rejected after Mrs Hogg advised that the group was not registered as an adoption agency with her department. Incorporation would create a legal entity, separating legal liability from the proprietor.

This week a social worker with International Social Services claimed that the most spectacular abuses, it is still fundamentally the same trade: the importation of Third World babies by First World couples.

Just as the conquistadors believed they had a better use for the Inca gold, so the modern visitors believe they can care better for the children. In some ways the North-South dialogue has not changed in four centuries.



Graeme Orr, (right) who helps couples to adopt babies overseas, and (left) Mrs Dallice Robins, who is stranded in Chile with the baby her daughter and son-in-law cannot bring to Australia.



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The fourth National ALP Women's Conference in Melbourne should have been something special. The conference is held every two years, and as it rotates around the states we may not see another for 10 years.

But who heard of it? The media coverage was dull, with none of the life and color one usually expects from a party conference. For once it was not our fault.

At the final press conference, the National Women's Officer Kate Moore said it had been "very successful". Well, it may have been for the lucky 490 who were on the inside, but what about the rest of us? Apart from the opening speeches and the press conference, it was closed to the public.

The organisers of the conference obviously wanted publicity. Before it began, invitations and "press kits" were issued to the media, advising that workshop leaders would be available for interviews. The program looked great — the theme was "Women, Work and Wealth" and it was going to show just how women are getting into the economic decision making, for too long seen as "men's business".

But despite this promise, quite a few workshop leaders were not available.

At the press conference, attended by about a dozen radio, television and newspaper journalists, Kate Moore said the conference had made lots of resolu-

tions, which were still being processed, and until that was finished, they would be treated as internal party documents. So who would have the right to process the resolutions? Not the fellows on the Federal Executive, we hope.

In vain did reporters ask for concrete examples of what the conference had achieved; if resolutions could not be made public, could we know what subjects had caused the most heated debate? No heated debate, was the quick assurance. There was "a broad level of consensus".

It was a chance for Labor women to rally and organise strategies, to draw support from each other. They had been meeting at separate conferences since 1981, and it was these that had helped to get so many women into positions of power in the party. Twelve per cent of Labor parliamentarians were women, much higher than any other party, Kate Moore said.

If the Labor women are now so strong, why can't they hold a real conference, out in the open, like the brothers and sisters of the ALP state and federal conferences? Or the Liberals in their party and women's conferences?

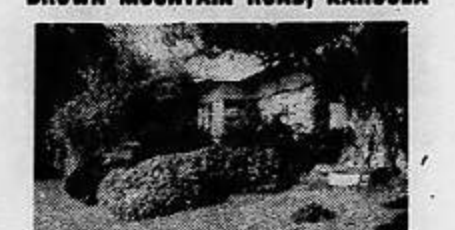
It is a matter of great sadness to many journalists that those with the best causes are often the most guarded, and least skilled at presenting them, while the really bad guys are so laid back in their manipulation that the media develop a love for them, and give them an infinitely good run. Look at the fitness of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, feeding his chooks. Can't Labor women stand the heat of having their arguments made public?

— Pamela Bone

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From Super 66 draw 473 on Saturday, February 1, the 6 winning Super 66 digits will be drawn simultaneously from a new barrel.


The single barrel has 6 compartments each containing 10 coloured balls numbered 0 to 9.


In all other respects the game won't change.

In Super 66 draw 475 on Saturday, February 8, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia will join Victoria, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory to participate in a Super 66 Bloc game.

Therefore, if there is not a Division 1 winner in Super 66 draw 473 on Saturday, February 1, the Division 1 prize money will be allocated to Division 2 winners in that draw only.







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