The counter-productive influence of mainstream media on development of policies designed to prevent harm to children

Speaker: Penny Mackieson
representing VANISH
(Victorian Adoption Network for Information & Self-Help)
Question for the audience:

Who regularly reads a mainstream Australian newspaper?
The curious case of baby Gammy and The Age
Cruel abandonment of a beautiful child

As the mother of beautiful eight-year-old twins, I was horrified to read about baby Gammy (The Age, 1/8). My son is a vibrant, smart and adored member of his family and community. He just happens to have Down syndrome (like Gammy). When he was born, people tried to comfort me by saying that I was chosen to have such a gift. At the time, among grief and the unknown, I did not take much notice, but over the years the joy and pride he has brought to me echoes those early words of encouragement. To think that beautiful Gammy is living in Thailand without his twin sister is unfathomable. It is also very sad that his impoverished “family” there cannot afford the surgery to correct his heart defect. Such shame on this surrogacy agency in Bangkok and the Australian parents who abandoned him. They do not sound like good-hearted, intelligent and accepting people, all the qualities necessary to raise well-rounded children. Thank you for publishing this story.

Diane Tymms, Kew, Victoria

Letter published in The Age on Monday August 4th, 2014
A plea for compassion and understanding

It is easy for the masses to judge and criticise the parents of Gammy. I would ask them if they have ever been forced to make the heart-wrenching decision to abort a foetus or raise a child with a severe disability. Having grown up with a brother with autism, and seen the effects of this on my parents and siblings, I understand why parents would opt for an abortion if they knew their child had a debilitating condition. Let’s stop making hateful gestures towards these people without fully understanding their situation.

Ellie Waters, Malvern, Victoria

Letter published in The Age on Monday August 4th, 2014
A shift in thinking has occurred over the years

The ignorant and prejudiced behaviour of Gammy’s parents in abandoning their child to the uncertainty of life in another country with someone they don’t really know cannot be countenanced (Letters, 4/8). As the father of a child born with a disability, who has given much time over the subsequent 38 years to understanding the needs of people living with a disability and seeking the means of their fulfilment, I have to say it is a false comparison to make about the relative hardships involved in living with one disability or another. All children bring problems of one sort or another, but there is far more assistance available to families now than previously. Nonetheless, even in the past parents generally took the line that the child was theirs and therefore their responsibility. A shift in thinking seems to have occurred since, and it’s neither to be applauded nor empathised with.

Rob Allen, West Hobart, Tasmania

Letter published in The Age on Tuesday August 5th, 2014
Disadvantage is entrenched

The plight of Gammy has deservedly captured the attention of the nation. The community outcry will hopefully lead to a much better outcome. Let’s, however, be mindful of the entrenched disadvantage facing children with disability in Australia, which has been detailed by numerous inquiries and statistics. Children with disability typically contend with discrimination, exclusion, high levels of abuse and an inability to access adequate services and supports in most areas of their life. This is reflected in rates of access to early childhood care and education, school completion rates, service waiting lists, unemployment rates and poverty experienced. Children and young people with disability fare unfavourably in every circumstance.

Some of these issues can be tackled through the National Disability Insurance Scheme but much wider community reform is needed. We are far from being a nation that welcomes and values the contribution of children with disability. So let’s use this swell of community support for Gammy to progress and prioritise the significant reform desperately required for children with disability.

Stephanie Gotlib, executive officer, Children with Disability Australia

Letter published in The Age on Tuesday August 5th, 2014
Rigorous surrogacy laws are vital

Baby Gammy has torn at the heartstrings of many Australians and is bringing to our attention the terrible plight of many babies born under unprincipled and unregulated surrogacy. Similar to the process we undertook with trafficking, Australia needs to apply rigorous laws and guidance to surrogacy overseas. Every child has the right to know the full details of their conception and be able to have a loving connection to those who provide their genetic inheritance, who carry them in their womb and who love and nurture them through childhood to adulthood. It is simply not good enough to say “Everyone deserves the gift of life” no matter what the cost. Far better to ask “Who am I?” and “Where do I come from?” Let’s get some principles and processes in place for surrogacy before we have any more commodified children like Baby Gammy and his sister.

Coleen Clare, Victorian Adoption Network for Information & Self-Help (VANISH)

Letter published in *The Age* on Tuesday August 5th, 2014
The Age’s coverage of the baby Gammy case and commercial surrogacy

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The Age’s opinion pieces on the baby Gammy case and commercial surrogacy

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<td>‘Commercial surrogacy is not the way forward’</td>
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<td>Julie Szego</td>
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Learn from my mistakes

Australian couples fear for surrogates in Nepal
It's a worrying development that so many people who live in democracies are either dissatisfied with politics or, worse still, have little faith in democracy as a system…

In part we can blame politicians. We are all sick of either blah blah blah or vitriol…

I admit that once I have made up my mind about someone I hear what they say through that prism. When someone of whom I think very little says anything with which I have a scintilla of sympathy I am genuinely annoyed. I do not want to feel as though I have anything in common.

The truth is we are all like this. We all need a mahout up in our brain to keep the emotive elephant in line and let the monkey have a better run. The monkey will use less blah blah blah and less vitriol – and politics will be the better for it.
Adoption a last resort

Since the 1980s, adoption has been rightly practised in Australia as a last resort alternative placement program for vulnerable children unable to live safely with their families, not as a family formation service for celebrities and the middle-class ("Blanchett baby puts spotlight on adoption", 8/3).

Adoption violates numerous universal children’s rights: it severs the legal, and often social and cultural, connections with family; and destroys the child’s identity. The horrific legacy of the Stolen Generations and the forced adoptions of previous decades has not stopped with the apologies; Tony Abbott is transforming intercountry adoption into a deregulated baby market.

Ever wondered why adoptees don’t spruik for easier, faster and cheaper access to adoption? It’s because they’ve experienced the traumatic losses and legacies inherent in adoption. Prospective adopters lobby because they have a misguided sense of entitlement. Adoption, like donor IVF and surrogacy, commodifies children.