

BOOK REVIEW

The Madness of Australian Child Protection. Why Adoption Will Rescue Australia's Underclass of Children

Sammut J. (2015). Ballarat: Connor Court Publishing, pp. 329, ISBN 9781925138832 (pbk), \$29.99.

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The Ultimate Child Rescue Manifesto

In 2015, Jeremy Sammut published two articles in *The Australian* newspaper that argued for family preservation to be set aside by Australian child protection authorities in cases of child abuse and neglect. Instead, he proposed the widespread use of adoption as the only intervention worth considering in cases of this kind. Sammut has labelled the combination of a family preservation ideology and the alleged 'taboo' or ban on the use of adoption in Australia as 'madness'.

The seven chapters of the book are titled as follows:

1. Hiding in plain sight: Australia's child protection crisis.
2. Under-responding: The marginalisation of child rescue.
3. Advocacy: The political economy of child abuse.
4. Systems abuse: Re-institutionalising out-of-home care.
5. Cultural correctness: The sorry tale of the social revolution.
6. Kinship conundrum: Politicisation of the stolen generation.
7. Taboo no more: Normalising 'open' adoptions from care.

Many will agree with Sammut, as I do, that the Australian child protection system is madness. But I strongly disagree with Sammut's analysis as to why this is. His claim that there is a taboo against adoption is hard to sustain given the range of societal changes to family life that have made adoption less viable for many families. It is, perhaps, these changes, rather than public policy, which have led to the decline in rates of adoption.

In chapter 2, Sammut strongly objects to attempts to preserve families where the issues are parental drug and alcohol use. Family preservation is seen as an ideology imposed on the Australian public services by misguided social work academics who brainwash students into believing that family preservation is in the best interest of children. How he knows that this is what goes on in Schools of Social Work

he does not explain, and in my experience as a social work academic this is a long way from the truth.

In addition, Sammut astonishingly labels children from neglectful and abusive families as 'underclass' children who he would remove immediately from these families irrespective of any attempts by parents at rehabilitation, which he dismisses as a waste of time.

Sammut's answer to the child protection dilemma is to make adoption the absolute priority for underclass children. This is regardless of how many more children would be removed from parental care than is now the case – even at a time when more children are already removed from parents and placed in state care in Australia than in any other comparable country.

What Sammut does not explain is how the increased demand for foster care placements, while adoptive parents are found for the increased number of children placed in care, will be satisfied under his proposal. Dual approval of potential carers as foster carers and as adoptive parents may go some way to resolving this issue, but it is too early to say if this relatively new practice will produce this outcome.

It appears, from chapter 6, that Sammut also envisages abolishing kinship care. Perhaps he recommends a situation in which kinship carers are forced to adopt a child in their care. In 2013–14, there were 12,583 such households in Australia (AIHW, 2015a) and it is hard to see how such a proposal will be eagerly welcomed by all of these households. Moreover, there is the issue of Aboriginal children's rights. At 30 June 2014, of the 43,009 children in out-of-home care, 14,991 (almost 30%) were Aboriginal (AIHW, 2015a) who will be exempt from adoption (except under extreme circumstances) if the recent NSW hierarchy of placement legislation (NSW CYP (CP) Act 1998)¹ is followed by other states and territories. So what then? Sammut's proposal to remove the Aboriginal placement principle for the sake of equity and treat non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal children and families the same way is less than convincing and is unlikely to receive support from the Aboriginal community.

There is also the question of the age of children who are taken into care. It is well established that most children that are adopted are under the age of 5 years (AFCARS, 2015; AIHW, 2015b; DoE, 2015; Neil, Beek, & Ward, 2015); and that it is easier to find adoptive parents for younger children by comparison with older children, especially adolescents. Yet at 30 June 2014, of the 43,009 children in care in Australia, only 9403 were under the age of 5 years. In fact, 33,606 were 5 years or older for whom finding adoptive parents will be no mean feat. Moreover, failure rates for the adoption of older children are significant. How does Sammut propose to deal with this issue?

Then there is the fraught issue of sibling groups consisting of 2, 3, 4 or more children of various ages. Is Sammut proposing to place these siblings with one set of adoptive parents, or is the proposal to split sibling groups and allow children to be separated from each other? Sammut says nothing about this issue, yet it is well documented that separating siblings can be devastating and can cause significant harm to them (Create, 2015; Sanders, 2004).

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 contain equally contentious analyses as, for example, in chapter 3 about advocacy and the political economy of child abuse. Or, as in chapter 4, a return to the use of residential programmes by child protection services, incorrectly termed institutional care, a claim that is hard to support given the low number of children and young people necessarily provided for in this way.

What Sammut is largely silent about is the legal issues that surround the removal of children from parental care and placing them in the care of the state or adoptive parents. For a child to be removed from parental care, it involves a fairly strenuous and prolonged Children's Court process where a parent's inability to satisfactorily look after a child has to be subjected to legal scrutiny. Only after this has been achieved, after potential adoptive parents have shown themselves to be suitable, and that adoption is thought to be in the best interests of the child, will adoption be considered. In NSW, the Supreme Court adoption process is more rigorous and more firmly evidence-based than earlier legal

proceedings in order for an application to be successful. The impression given by Sammut is that he would prefer these legal requirements and safeguards to be truncated in order to push up adoption rates and, in his terms, allow for more children to be 'rescued'.

The final question is about the availability of adoptive parents. Is there a never ending line of adults queuing up to adopt a child, other than a young baby? I think not.

In the end, the problem with this book is Sammut's flawed and outdated ideology about child rescue. This is an ideology just as much as Sammut's hated, so called, family preservation ideology, but it leads us nowhere. In the end, the best way to view this book is as a political manifesto from someone who wants to lead a revolution in child protection services. But, like many other political revolutions, this revolution would take us in the wrong direction because of Sammut's vengeful attitude towards what he terms underclass parents and children.

Endnote

¹ NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998.

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