

THE Daily Telegraph

Deborra-lee's adoption victory

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Article from: The Associated Press

By **Ellen Connolly**

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ACTOR Deborra-lee Furness and The Sunday Telegraph have won a major victory in a campaign to overhaul Australia's anti-adoption culture.

The Rudd Government announced last week it would create a federal governing body to streamline the system, cut waiting lists and make overseas adoption a "priority".

The Government said while the states would still have carriage of applications, Canberra would establish national uniform regulations, as well as open up new adoption programs with more overseas countries.

A peak federal body of state representatives is also being formed.

"I'm absolutely thrilled," Furness said. "It's the first sign of the new leadership taking charge of this issue.

"This is the beginning - now we have many more steps to go."

It follows a four-month campaign by Furness and *The Sunday Telegraph* in highlighting the inadequacies of Australia's inter-country adoption procedures. Australia currently has the second-lowest rate of overseas adoption in the world.

Furness brought the issue into the public arena in August when she spoke of the obstacles she and husband Hugh Jackman encountered when they tried to adopt in Australia eight years ago.

The couple endured a series of bureaucratic blocks and an unsupportive Community Services Department. In the end they gave up and returned to the US, where the process of adopting their two children, Oscar and Ava, was efficient and supportive to parents.

Since then, Furness has formed an action group and held meetings with the Attorney-General's department and deputy leader Julia Gillard.

International Adoptive Families of Queensland president Mark Byrne praised the campaign for bringing the issue to the fore.

"We've been pushing for these changes for years but it took Deborra-lee and your paper to make it happen much more quickly," he said.

He said, as the number of local adoptions in Australia continued to fall, the demand from childless couples to adopt overseas would only grow.

A spokesman for Attorney-General Robert McClelland said the renegotiated Commonwealth-State agreement on adoption was being formalised.

"We are eager to work with the states to ensure the best outcomes for Australian families. We are committed to the harmonising of Australia's intercountry adoption practices and reduced waiting lists are obviously desirable," the spokesman said.

Ricky Brisson, who runs Australian Intercountry Adoption Network, wants the Government to allow accredited specialised agencies to take over the role of state DoCS in adoption applications.

Alison Rigby, who adopted orphaned twins from Colombia, said the process was "very drawn out" and cost \$80,000.

"I really feel very concerned for people now who are just starting to adopt because there are fewer countries, the age criteria is getting younger, and families are waiting longer and longer," Ms Rigby said.

When she was in Colombia she met couples from the US, Norway and Sweden, who spoke of the ease and tax concessions they were offered by their countries.

Furness said she wanted Australia to bring new countries into the Hague Convention, which would cut the seven-year waiting lists.

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