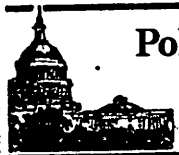


Blocking Gay Adoptions Hurts Kids

Imagine breaking up families and sentencing thousands of kids to perpetual foster care. Yet, under the guise of family values, that's exactly what some social conservatives would do.

Groups like the Family Research Council, and the Traditional Values Coalition, headed by renowned hate monger Lou Sheldon, want to deny gays and lesbians the right to adopt children. Unfortunately this put-these-kids-last posture has the backing of both President Bush and his brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush.



Politics & People

By Albert R. Hunt

In a perfect world, each of the more than 100,000 kids waiting to be adopted would be taken in by a caring, responsible husband and wife. But, as Adam Pertman, author of "Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming America," notes: "It's far from a perfect world when it comes to adoption." Most kids who can't fit into that perfect world are better off with single parents or gay and lesbian parents.

The issue crystallized when a federal judge upheld a mean-spirited quarter-century-old Florida law that bans adoption by gays or lesbians. There are only two other states, Mississippi and Utah, that prohibits adoptions by gay couples, but there are efforts to make it more difficult elsewhere.

This is hypocrisy writ large. Gay and lesbian couples in Florida can adopt a child in most other states, so it's the kids who are hurt. Moreover, while the social right insists on the sanctity of married couple adoptions, one out of four Florida adoptions is by a single parent.

With the work of Bill Clinton, Ameri-

ca's most pro-adoption president, and sympathetic GOP congressional leaders, adoption is on the upswing. There are more generous tax breaks, states are rewarded for moving kids more expeditiously out of foster care, and transracial barriers are eroding. In 2000 the number of kids adopted from the public foster-care system doubled from five years earlier to 50,000.

Still, the supply outstrips the demand. There were 134,000 children waiting to be adopted in 2000. These aren't babies. On average they are over eight years of age and have been waiting for more than three years.

The American Academy of Pediatricians recently supported gay adoptions or, more precisely, second-parent adoptions in same-sex couples: "Children who grow up with one or two gay or lesbian parents fare as well in emotional, cognitive, social and sexual functioning as do children whose parents are heterosexual," the pediatricians reported.

"We looked at a lot of data and there is no support for a commonly held belief that these kids are at special risk or do poorly," says Dr. Joseph Hagan, a Burlington, V.T., pediatrician who chaired the committee that directed the study.

Other medical associations and prominent adoption advocates, such as the Dave Thomas Center for Adoption, support this view. But the homophobic right went ballistic. Lou Sheldon labeled the pediatricians a "homosexual" group that wanted to tear down the American family. The Family Research Council insisted data showed this is "incontrovertibly inconsistent" with raising healthy kids. Foes of gay and lesbian adoptions, frequently cite a study by two University of Southern California academics published in the American Sociological Review, which they claim proves harmful

effects of gay and lesbian parenting.

"That is totally false," replies sociologist Judith Stacey, one of the authors of that study. "They use phony research and then egregiously distort real research."

Professor Stacey's study, actually a review of all the surveys on the subject, paralleled the pediatricians' conclusions. There was one very small British study involving about 50 children which showed kids with a gay or lesbian parent are more inclined to have a homosexual experience. But, she says, that's not conclusive.

State of Adoption

Number of kids in foster care awaiting adoption in 2000:

Total no. of kids:	134,000
No. of kids adopted:	50,000
Avg. age of kids in foster care:	8
White:	32%
Non-white:	59%

Source: The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

It also is largely irrelevant to current realities. Hard data on adoption is remarkably elusive—the census asked an adoption question for the first time in 2000—but the very reliable Evan B. Donaldson Institute estimates that 30% to 40% of kids in foster care are physically disabled, and as many as 60% have some sort of psychological disorder. There's considerable anecdotal evidence suggesting gays and lesbians disproportionately are willing to take these hard-to-adopt kids.

In the Florida case, two gay men wanted to adopt a 10-year-old, HIV-positive boy they'd cared for since he was an infant. Gov. Bush's administration also is fighting the efforts of another gay man to adopt a 9-year-old boy he's cared for ever since he was abandoned by his parents.

There are an estimated 3,400 foster-

care kids in Florida waiting for adoption. Many, like these two children, suffer special disadvantages. If gays or lesbians aren't permitted to adopt these kids, there is only one recourse: they'll stay in foster care. So when Ken Conner, the president of the Family Research Council, says there's no justification for adoption by a gay or lesbian couple, he sends a simple message to these children: Let them rot.

"We're not talking about kids where there's a long line around the block to adopt," notes Mr. Pertman. "Many of these are the hardest kids to get anybody to take. How anyone justifies putting a child in the ninth foster home in seven years rather than be adopted by someone who wants them is beyond me."

The situation is analogous to the fight over transracial adoption. African-American social workers long argued that to allow whites to adopt black children amounted to "racial genocide." Since there weren't enough prospective African-American adoptive parents, this meant relegating these minority kids to perpetual foster care.

But Bill Clinton backed an effort spearheaded by liberal Democratic Sen. Howard Metzenbaum to break down this barrier. It's okay to give an African-American preference in adopting a baby of the same race. But if that's not possible, it's no longer permissible to block a transracial adoption. This is precisely what ought to be done with gay or lesbian adoptions in Florida and elsewhere.

Enhancing adoption in America is putting kids first. Bill Clinton was right to take on one of his constituencies, black social workers, to further this goal. It will be instructive to see whether Jeb and George W. Bush likewise care more about these kids who need homes, or are more interested in pandering to one of their constituencies, the homophobic right.