

Private Members Motion-386
2nd Reading Debate

Speech by Jeff Watson, MP Essex

Embargoed until 1:30 pm EST

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's my pleasure to rise today to speak on my motion regarding the subject of federal supports for adoptive parents.

My motion, M-386, recommends the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development, and the Status of Persons with Disabilities examine current federal support measures available for adoptive parents, while, recognizing and respecting provincial and territorial jurisdictions.

Such a study would be beneficial in helping us evaluate current public policy while shedding more light on issues faced by adoptive parents.

Some honourable members may be surprised to discover I was adopted as an infant into the care of a wonderful family. And that I count an esteemed Senator and Hockey Hall of Fame forward as a relative through my biological mother. It may come as a further surprise that my wife, Sarah, and I have desired for several years now to add to our five beautiful biological children an adopted child. It is this journey that has connected us to many other Canadians who are seeking to adopt – or have adopted – and the myriad challenges they face along the way.

I will come back to this later in my comments.

But first let's establish our clear foundation: the family is the basic building block of society. Everything starts with the family.

It's where we raise, nurture, and protect our children. It's where we teach them about who they are, where they come from, and why they are here.

And so much of our society's future depends on making sure Canadian families receive the proper respect and support they need to ensure their children succeed, learn, grow, and take their place in society.

And let us agree there is equal value for parenting whether one is a biological or adoptive parent. And let us also agree there is equal value for children whether biological or adopted. And let this fundamental accord ultimately find full expression in the policy choices of government.

Currently there are several support measures available to adoptive parents. EI parental benefits are available for working parents. Our Conservative government passed Bill C-14 granting permanent resident status or Canadian citizenship to adopted children making that process quicker and easier.

Adoptive parents are also eligible for a range of supports that our Government provides to families with children, including the Adoption Tax Credit, which helps defray the costs of adoption at tax time.

Adoptive parents also receive the Universal Child Care Benefit of \$100 per child under age 6 and the Child Tax Credit of \$2000 per child under 18 – measures by this government. As well, they

are eligible for the Canada Child Benefit and the National Child Benefit supplement for families with low and middle income levels.

By way of example and as the most visible support available to adoptive parents let me speak more fully about the EI program and its special benefits which include parental benefits.

The EI program currently includes four types of special benefits to support working Canadians when they experience an interruption in earnings owing to childbirth, parenting, illness, or the provision of care or support to a gravely ill family member.

The EI program has provided maternity benefits to a maximum of 15 weeks since 1971. These weeks are specifically for birth mothers to recover while they are physically unable to work due to pregnancy and childbirth. Maternity benefits can start up to eight weeks prior to the expected date of birth and allow biological mothers to recuperate after childbirth and care for their newborn infants during their first weeks after birth.

The EI program helps both biological and adoptive parents balance work and family responsibilities by providing support for them to stay home with their newly born or adopted child. These are parental benefits – payable to a maximum of 35 weeks. Adoptive parents may receive these benefits from the date the child is placed with the new family. And the 35 weeks of parental benefits can be used by either the mother or father or shared between them.

And there are some elements under maternity and parental EI benefits designed to make the program flexible and supportive.

For example if parental benefits are being shared by both parents only one waiting period needs to be served.

If a child has to be hospitalized, parents can choose to claim parental benefits immediately or when the child comes home from the hospital.

Additional benefits are also available to assist low-income families with children through the Family Supplement, which can increase the basic benefit rate from 55% to a maximum of 80% for claimants with low net family incomes.

A further element of flexibility is parents may collect maternity and parental benefits while out of the country by advising Service Canada of their absence from Canada before leaving.

The EI program also allows parents to work while on claim. And, effective as of December of last year, our government increased the amount that can be earned while working part-time and receiving EI benefits.

Last, I'm not going to go into possible maternity benefits for self-employed Canadians except to say that a government bill will ultimately capture this debate.

Biological and adoptive parents share many things:

Bringing a baby home is exciting and exhilarating – and exhausting.

There's a shared concern about having the abilities and the time needed to lay a solid foundation for a healthy relationship with their children.

And both biological and adoptive parents need recuperation for emotional, physical, and psychological effects of receiving children. While maternity benefits recognize this for biological parents currently there is no additional benefit for adoptive parents.

There are some real – and often little or unknown – challenges facing adoptive parents which birth parents don't face and which need to be considered in the light of public policy.

First of all adoption means parents have to prove they are acceptable to receive a child. The same isn't true of biological parents. And the process is grueling. As one adoptive mother shared with me:

"...we were meeting ... with a social worker and watching our family, marriage, children, and history get picked apart and analyzed. We spent four months under an intense microscope, they questioned our motives, our communication, our parenting, and our marriage – we usually left these meetings feeling wrung out and completely bare"

This same mother understood the need for ensuring the fitness and commitment of potential parents for adopting a child. Nevertheless, the process is draining and something biological parents don't face.

Second, the time before receiving the child can be very different for biological and adoptive parents.

Not only is the screening process emotionally taxing but the process of adoption has fees and costs not to mention the lost work time – income that isn't replaced.

Adoptive parents almost always wait longer to receive their child than biological parents. Gestation is usually not longer than 9 and a-half months. Quick adoptions are available for those seeking a child with special needs. Beyond that adoptive parents wait. And wait. And wait.

And adoptive parents are at a disadvantage to biological parents in the attachment process before receiving the child. Attachment starts for biological parents during the pregnancy. Mom begins to feel and experience fetal development and movement in her own body. Dad can begin to experience and relate to the developing baby *in utero* too. And with the marvels of modern ultrasound biological moms and dads can see their baby long before birth.

Adoptive parents on the other hand cannot begin the process of attachment until their child is placed with them. Though, in some cases like private adoptions where the mother is known to prospective adoptive parents, the process of attachment can begin earlier. But there is little freedom to fully enter into attachment for either parents to-be or child with remaining ties to the biological mother and the prospect that, after child placement, the biological mother can revoke her decision to put the child up for adoption. In most cases, however, the child is unknown to the hopeful parents until the time of placement.

Third, adoptive parents usually have little notice when it's time to receive their child. For biological parents – and as a father of five with a wife who, as a *doula* (or birth coach) has attended some 200 live births, I know well – normal pregnancy offers many clues to the arrival of baby in the lead-up to birth. As such, maternity benefits can be planned for. For adoptive parents, pre-placement is wait then frantically – almost chaotically - hurry-up. Such a situation leaves little or no opportunity to prepare for placement by arranging proper leave from work.

Transition is far from seamless.

Fourth, birth always involves a baby. Adoption doesn't.

And the older the adopted child often the tougher is the transition for parent and child. Older children who are adopted can experience developmental delays or health issues that can complicate the process of attachment to adoptive parents. Because older children come with a history either with the birth mother or through foster care they can often be dealing with issues of loss, trauma, neglect, or multiple caregivers. Moreover, barriers to successful parent-child attachment perpetuate the child's inability to form trusting and reliable relationships in life.

Consider Jennifer L. and the transitional difficulties she, her husband, Jason, their three biological children, and her then two-year old adopted son - who had a history of neglect from his biological mother - experienced:

"No one will ever convince me that children have less awareness than adults. Sometimes ... they're more keenly aware of what is happening. That was true for our little boy. He knew [his biological mother] was leaving him forever and reacted like she was. I've never heard a cry like the one that came out of his little body that day, not before, nor since. He shook with loss, sobbed with loss, fully understood loss and a part of his heart was broken. That's what it sounded like. Five years later we still face it every once in awhile: a broken heart more ready to lash out at love than to receive it and more able to test than trust.

Once our parental rights were established, two weeks after 'leaving day' we thought he'd be able to experience a smooth transition into our family. We spent a year thinking that every day. And every day his actions begged that we reject him ... If we hugged, he bit. If we praised, he ripped. He banged his head into walls and threw himself off stairs. He rolled screaming from one end of the room to the other for hours and hours – sometimes the entire time he was awake. And we loved and we cried and we despaired and we held on harder. We were told he had an attachment disorder. No one needed to tell us – we lived it. When I considered the attachment I had with my biological children I remembered the time spent holding them as infants, rocking, and cradling them. So we wrapped him in his snuggly and we held him. And he screamed. And we held him longer.

The stress was overwhelming. The bar for adoption had been set so high we felt as though we had barely been approved as parents. Would they now take him away? We were failing. Our children were stressed. They all had eagerly anticipated this little brother. And he had rejected them completely. As a family we decided to make lists of what we were thankful for in him so we could yell them out in the midst of his yelling. He had an amazing giggle. He loved to help. He made us laugh. And when he disconnected from us these kept us holding on."

Jennifer's experience is not uncommon for parents who adopt children older than infants.

We rightly recognize the value of biological motherhood and time together for biological parents and children is a worthwhile investment.

But what about adoptive parents?

They need their unique circumstances understood by those with a mandate to legislate; to know that their desire to parent is met with policies that support their choice to adopt. It has been said, "It takes a village to raise a child". With thousands of children in foster care across Canada and children orphaned around the world through famine, natural disaster, civil unrest and wars, those among us able and willing to adopt are key to the well-being of these children and to the building of vibrant families and communities. A grateful society must do all it can to assist them in their parenthood journey.

I call on the House to support this motion to have the HUMA Committee study the supports available to adoptive parents. Let it call witnesses to explore the challenges of adoptive parents. Let it examine both domestic and international adoptions. And let it compare what supports are offered in other jurisdictions like Quebec and BC. Can we improve our support system? Can we find a consensus around two or three issues that no matter our partisan stripe, we can all support?

And, maybe, after hearing testimony, Committee members will agree with me that it's time for a flexible EI Adoption Transition Leave of comparable length to maternity benefits?

Colleagues, I have a vision of a Canada big enough and loving enough to affirm the value of all children.

Join with me and vote yes on M-386.

Thank you.