



# Ann WIDDECOMBE

## Adoption targets are ruining lives

**G**OVERNMENT targets are dangerous devices which often mean a complete reversal of values and priorities that should be taken for granted.

In the NHS, surgeons perform fewer serious operations ahead of ones they would normally have put first to meet numbers laid down for them.

Immigration authorities arrive on the doorsteps of those whose whereabouts have always been known, who are encumbered with mortgages and families and who are the least likely to disappear, while ignoring the wiles and machinations of thousands who abuse our laws but who might be rather hard to track down.

The Child Support Agency makes life hell for the dutiful father but can be toothless and inert when it comes to the deadbeat dads who spawn their kids in one-night stands and are never seen again.

The list of folly and cruelty committed in the name of Government targets is a long one but there is a very consistent pattern: it is to fill up the tick boxes of the forms by aiming at soft targets. For every case where a department has to take up time and manpower and deploy a certain amount of ingenuity to implement the spirit and intention of the law, there are dozens where it will be no trouble at all to implement its letter. It is called the culture of soft targets.

I thought that, however angry I

might be, I was past being shocked by it all because I have become so used to hearing meaningless statistics poured into one ear by Government ministers while the other one rings with the cries of their victims.

I was wrong. The scandal of adoption targets has left me reeling with outrage and incredulity.

I can understand why the Government felt it necessary to monitor adoption in this country. Any system that is so long-winded that childless couples go abroad rather than endure its rigours is in desperate need of reform. Any system that is so rigid that children grow up in care because potential adopters may have crossed some arbitrary age line or admit to having smacked their own children once or twice is a nonsense.

So, yes, Government intervention is long overdue - but never has there been a more inappropriate case for assessment by target. Ministers want a 40 per cent increase in adoptions and local social services are expected to come up with the answer. In one local authority, that answer appears to be to remove children from those who are too stupid to know how to resist.

Police are investigating not one but six complaints of parents where one or both has a learning difficulty and who lost their children after allegedly misleading statements in court. Previously the same county council had tried to remove children from a family with autism. Only the most rig-

orous investigation will show whether or not these complaints are justified, but the facts of one particular case should make us all cry for the children involved.

A 29-year-old mother with an IQ of 60 and the father, who is 38, have been told they may not see their children again until they are 18. Meanwhile, adoption has twice failed because one child has developed a medical condition and, as the child is in care, his real parents have no right to know anything about his treatment. The children are four and 14 months and the only objection to the parents appears to be their low intelligence.

**I**T IS the social workers who have low intelligence if they believe that the ordeal to which they are subjecting these children is preferable to having them brought up by loving but not very bright parents.

It is, after all, not as if the State has a good record of parenting. Most of those for whom it cares turn out unemployed, drug addicted or criminal.

That, of course, is because most of those taken into care come from dysfunctional families but I am beginning to wonder if it could also be because some were torn from loving families, subjected to years of indecision and consistently put second to some wretched Government target.