A dark side lurks within

Joseph Parkinson fears a distaste for disabilities

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Australia was outraged last week when the story emerged of Gammy, a baby boy with Down syndrome and the product of a surrogacy arrangement whose commissioning parents took home his healthy twin sister but allegedly abandoned Gammy to the care of his impoverished Thai birth mother.

There was almost universal reaction against the shocking suggestion that a child could be created deliberately through a commercial arrangement and then rejected because he was not what someone wanted.

Australia does not permit commercial surrogacy or “surrogacy for reward” precisely because it risks turning into mere commodities both the babies created and the women who offer themselves as birth mothers.

In this country we hold that human beings are never commodities that can be the object of trade or commercial arrangements and this belief is built on our conviction that every person has an inherent dignity that must be protected at all costs.

Our laws against unjust discrimination are built on the same conviction.

There are many deeply distressing aspects of Gammy’s tragic story, but if we dwell on it long enough we can also identify important ethical questions and even a few signs of hope.

We may feel justified in condemning the way surrogacy is carried out in some countries that have so far failed to regulate the practice because we have confidence in the strong legislative framework around surrogacy in our own State.

The kind of blatant discrimination of which Gammy’s genetic parents stand accused is just not possible in WA: our surrogacy laws require that commissioning parents must accept and care for either all of the children born of a surrogacy arrangement or none of them.

But we also recognise the laws are not perfect. There is no WA law prohibiting couples from pursuing surrogacy in other countries. It will be interesting to see whether or when a relatively simple amendment is passed to make this improvement.

Curiously, a few of this State’s IVF practitioners, the technicians who make surrogacy possible, would prefer to see less rather than more legislative protections around surrogacy. Gammy’s case, and public reaction to it, shows these attitudes to be seriously out of step with public opinion.

On the contrary, we should be proud of our State’s commitment to take into account the many serious ethical questions around surrogacy and the refusal to compromise the tight regulations already in place.

We rail against the choice apparently made by Gammy’s genetic parents, which at face value seems callous beyond belief. But we are also deeply gratified that so many people contributed to the fund established to provide for his ongoing medical care.
For me the most wonderful aspect of this generosity is not the amount raised but how quickly the fund target was reached and surpassed.

This almost instantaneous outpouring of charity speaks volumes for our native instinct to protect and nurture the weakest and most vulnerable members of our human family and to lend a hand to those who struggle against adversity in any form. This natural ethical reflex is the valued bedrock of countless acts of goodness and kindness practised by so many of us every day, with little or no desire for recognition.

This is not a uniquely Australian trait. It is an ethical quality embedded in human nature and that, too, can give us cause to rejoice.

But there is also a dark side. The fact Gammy has Down syndrome and other disabilities adds a particularly sharp edge to our outrage.

We cannot bring ourselves to believe that any parent would willingly abandon him just because they did not wish to deal with a disabled child.

But that anger is quickly muted when we realise how many people make exactly the same decision before their child is even born.

To be outraged at such a decision made after birth, but meekly accepting a similar decision before birth, is discriminatory in the extreme.

And perhaps the most shocking aspect of all is the possibility that this same attitude, which discounts people with disabilities and values only our own sense of “fitness”, is latent within me.

It surfaces whenever I see the disability and not the person; whenever I turn my face from the ill or the elderly or the suffering because they do not meet my standards of capacity and wholeness; whenever I would rather cross the road than come face-to-face with that wheelchair-bound child whose life I know will be short and filled with suffering; whenever I pity his parents, secretly grateful that it is they and not I who will have to care for him for many years to come.

There are many challenging aspects to Gammy’s story, but perhaps the most frightening and challenging is the possibility that I hold exactly the same attitudes myself.

I will know whether my outrage at Gammy’s tragedy is sincere only if I learn this, perhaps his most important lesson: that the true measure of my humanity lies in how I receive the disabled and marginalised within my own circle of life.