

The inaugural Families Australia Oration
by the Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia,
Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC

Welcome address by
Brian Babington
Chief Executive Officer
Families Australia
University House,
The Australian National University, Canberra
16 October 2008

Your Excellency, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

A very warm welcome to you all to the Families Australia National Oration. My name is Brian Babington; I am the CEO of Families Australia.

I would like to acknowledge that we are meeting tonight on the lands of the traditional owners and I pay my respects to them and their ancestors.

Tonight is a very special occasion for us. We are delighted that the Governor-General has agreed to deliver the first in a series of annual addresses by distinguished Australians on national family issues.

Before introducing Ms Bryce, I would like first to introduce our good friend Matilda House to provide the welcome to country.

In welcoming each and every one of you tonight, I would also like to acknowledge some special guests:

- The Chair of Families Australia, Ms Sandie de Wolf, and members of the Board of Families Australia;
- Dr Jeff Harmer, Secretary of the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs;
- Professor Alan Hayes, Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies;

- Professor Dorothy Scott, Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia;
- Ms Linda Crebbin, ACT Children and Young People Commissioner;
- Mr Paul Mason, Tasmanian Children's Commissioner; and
- Dr Howard Bath, Northern Territory Children's Commissioner.

The renowned 20th century philosopher, Alan Watts, when talking about the Buddhist view of the human condition, wrote, "we are like someone trying to do up a parcel of water. As soon as we think we have safely got it together, it escapes the packaging."

This sense of trying, trying, and never quite getting it right seems to be a good analogy for much of family life.

Families, however they are defined, in all their wonderful diversity, can give immense joy, purpose and meaning, but they can also be very much like trying to do up a parcel of water.

It is clear that in Australia today, many, many families find the task of keeping it all together supremely difficult.

A level playing field of free and open choice is available only to some Australian families.

For far too many, however, complex social, economic, political and environmental conditions work against the enjoyment of even some basic human rights.

I am talking about being safe from physical, emotional or sexual abuse, having a house to live in, and having enough to eat.

We also meet tonight at a time of sharpened anxiety for a very large number of families as they look on at the global economic crisis.

Many are wondering how much more difficult it will be to keep the water in the wrapping this time around.

Today has been the first of two days of a symposium run by Families Australia and the Australian Centre for Child Protection.

I wish to pay special tribute to the head of that Centre - one of Australia's foremost advocates for children - my wonderful colleague - Professor Dorothy Scott.

The symposium is about finding better ways to work together to tackle pressing issues, such as the protection of children, in the face of complex causal factors, including substance abuse and domestic violence.

Amongst other ideas, we want, unashamedly, to propagate the idea that services assisting families and adults ought also to offer assistance to children, and children's services ought to "think and act family", especially when it comes to working with the most vulnerable.

This Oration is part of Families Australia's contribution aimed at raising awareness about the issues facing families and stimulating thinking about ways that families might be better supported.

I want here to thank the Honourable Jenny Macklin MP, the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, and our friends at her Department for their ongoing support of Families Australia and this gathering.

Families Australia's reason for being, as an independent, peak, not-for-profit organisation, is to help to promote a national public policy environment in which the needs and interests of families, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised, can be heard and addressed.

Tonight's Oration is to be delivered by a person who has spent decades, in a wide variety of roles, arguing the case for families and individuals.

Quentin Bryce has been a ground-breaker for many important causes. She has made major contributions to advancing human rights and equality, the rights of women and children, and the welfare of the family.

She has had a rich and distinguished career as an academic, lawyer, community and human rights advocate, university college principal and Vice-Regal representative in Queensland, and now Australia.

Not only that, but she and her husband Michael have raised five children and have a hand in raising five grandchildren.

We are especially honoured, Your Excellency, that you are with us so early in your term of office. We are thrilled by your appointment; delighted that you seemed to have brought rain to the Murray-Darling basin on your recent visit; and eagerly anticipate your address tonight.

Ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce.