

Families are at the centre of a successful nation

Address by Brian Babington, Chief Executive, Families Australia
to Moonee Valley Carers Network, Melbourne, 15 May 2008

The extent to which the Rudd Government makes sustainable and memorable advances in family circumstances will depend on its capacity to tackle central issues of vision, to resource more targeted help for families and to overcome barriers created by Commonwealth-State/Territory rivalries.

I would like to start by saying a few words about Families Australia. We have been going since 2001 as the national, independent, non-government peak body which promotes the interests of families at the national level.

In a nutshell, we are a policy think-tank and advocacy organisation. We have around 400 member organisations across Australia in the family and community NGO sector.

Our members include many of the largest NGOs, as well as hundreds of local community bodies, such as child care centres and youth and counselling services.

Not only do we listen to our members about the needs of families, but we also go out to the public directly through focus groups. In the past year or two, we have heard from hundreds of Australians in this way. These views form an essential part of our policy thinking.

To give you an idea of what we do, in the past year, we have been playing a leading role in the NGO push for a National Child Protection Framework – I am pleased to say that that work is starting to bear fruit under the new Government.

We have been adding an advocacy voice on a range of other fronts – from trying to get better financial support for grandparents, to urging governments to take more comprehensive approaches to tackle

substance abuse, and helping to overhaul assessment criteria for government payments to carers of children with severe disability.

We have been urging the Federal Government to engage more with employer groups to find practical ways to improve work-life-family balance. We have been an active public supporter of universal paid parental leave, a topic now receiving attention through the Productivity Commission.

We have been assisting a so-far relatively little known group of Australians, the Forgotten Australians - people who, as children, during the period from the 1930s to the 1970s, were in institutions, such as orphanages - to gain recognition and support for the maltreatment that many suffered.

The other major string to our bow is about celebrating the importance of families. This week is National Families Week. Around Australia, over 120,000 people are participating in community events to celebrate the importance of families, however people would like to define them.

A special theme of National Families Week 2008 is to encourage all Australians to do practical things to more effectively balance work and family responsibilities.

Beyond the scorecard

'Working families' has become something of a mantra of the Rudd Government. I wanted to start by saying that, if I had to issue a 'score-card' on this week's Budget, so far the Rudd Government has made an encouraging start. The Budget was clearly aimed at delivering Election promises to give greater support to least advantaged families, and that is certainly a good thing.

However, an organisation like mine is always going to have a suggestion or two up its sleeve. I want to share today some of my thoughts about what the Rudd Government can do to help families more.

I want to say three things on the following central theme: the Rudd Government can and probably will do a lot to help families through

budget processes and short-to-medium term policy and program measures, but the extent to which his Government makes sustainable and memorable advances in family circumstances will depend on its capacity to tackle central issues of vision, to resource more targeted help for families and to overcome barriers created by Commonwealth-State/Territory rivalries.

I. Towards a shared national vision about 'family'

The first point is about where families should sit in our society and in our lives. Over decades, there has been a tendency by governments, and I suspect by many of us individually, to assume that families are an almost infinite resource which can be drawn upon to support economic activity.

While not asserting an anti-capitalist model, families as distinct entities have often been seen as silent 'factors of production' in efforts to ensure that the nation remains economically competitive. Supported by the growth of consumerism, a working assumption has been that macro-economic growth will flow through to greater individual, family and societal wellbeing.

In turn, governments have used social security and taxation incentives and penalties to maximise workforce participation. Compared with many other countries, Australian has been particularly susceptible to this line of policy response because of our relatively low population base. Getting as many hands to the pump as possible, as it were, has been seen as vitally important in sustaining our comparatively prosperous international position.

In practical terms, this message is seen manifested when governments urges us all to find better work-family balance, to try to help people remain in the workplace and to maximise workforce participation while juggling family and individual life.

The Government's cautious approach on paid parental leave may well be a sign of ambivalence to engage in a more fundamental task of forging a national consensus on the right balance between family and work life.

Again, don't misunderstand – work is a good thing for many reasons. But, the issue is: just how far can and should we push people before family life fractures even more than at present? There are enough signs of stress to get us concerned.

- More than 1.7 million Australians work 50 hours or more per week, twice as many as 1982.
- Fathers employed full time spent on average 52 hours per week in employment-related activities – this is among the longest working hours in OECD countries.
- More than 60% of Australian workers work on weekends or between 7am and 7pm.
- While more mothers with children under 15 are employed than at any time in the last decade, those in full time work were still spending an average of 18 hours per week on housework, or double the amount of fathers also in full time work.
- A study Families Australia undertook last year highlighted the enormous loads being carried by carers of children and young people with a disability who wished to remain in the workforce.

It seems that a large part of the problem is that, in a time of bold political thinking, we have not yet decided where family fits in a broad national vision of what a successful nation looks like.

How do we define national success? How do we define national wealth? Do we work to live, or live to work? How do we weigh up the contributions of families in evaluating national wealth?

Take, for example, the longer term impact of climate change on families in terms of rising food and electricity prices. Is it proper for families to keep bearing these costs or will government seek to ensure that businesses, such as coal producers, will pay in line with their industry's contribution to global warming and climate change?

I suggest that we spend more time reflecting on what sort of society we want to be in 2020, not in the silo-ed form that we saw in the recent 2020 Summit, but a model based on what we value and what factors should be in balance. Government has a role in that holistic debate about family wellbeing but is yet to take a strong lead.

In fairness, collectively, we have imposed the primacy of economics on politicians and governments. It has become entrenched as we, as a nation, have emphasised the measurement of quantifiable outcomes. But, are we measuring the right things? It is salutary that in a recent UNICEF report on the wellbeing of children in so-called “rich countries”, Australia was unranked overall because we do not collect sufficient data on the nature and quality of relationships between children and their families. That should tell us something about what, to date, we have valued.

It takes a brave government to inculcate a debate about values, let alone happiness. Maybe governments can never move that far. It would be shame, however, if we miss the opportunity to debate issues such as the qualities we would like in our family relationships and the amount of time we think we should work without compromising family life.

II. Responding sensitively to rapidly changing family needs and forms

My second proposition is that Government cannot serve families better until it comes to grips more fundamentally with the rapidity of change in family forms and needs. Families mean different things and government responses need to become more sophisticated in supporting them.

While the most common family type in Australia is a couple family with children, the percentage of people in that category is shrinking. There have been marked increases in the percentage of couple-only families and in families composed of lone parents with dependent children.

We now find an increasing number of family members who are sandwiched by responsibilities to care for older family members as well as children. Grandparent headed families are on the increase. Numerous families face multiple barriers to economic and social participation because of factors such as mental illness and substance abuse.

The very definition of ‘family’ can be an uneasy conundrum for many. Politicians are often prone to fall behind the ‘mum, dad and two kids’ variant, but there are many other forms of family, each deserving

respect. And, not only are the forms diverse, but their needs are changing as rapidly as the society surrounding them.

Here are some issues reflecting changing family forms that require careful, sensitive and nuanced, rather than broad-brush, responses as in the past:

- Thousands of grandparents raising grandchildren cannot access government services because they aren't helped to understand and navigate government systems, and some just don't 'fit' the system.
- The same is true for many thousands of family members providing care to aged relatives who find it difficult to know what help they can obtain because of the lack of a one-stop-shop for advice and assistance.
- Many families where a member has a substance abuse problem require more support.
- Our foster carers are diminishing in numbers because of an increase in the number of children being taken into care across Australia and failure to properly recognise and remunerate these carers.
- Carers of family members with disability require far more acknowledgement, financial help and respite.
- Indigenous families need greater choice about the range of assistance, but this is constrained, at least in part by a lack of Indigenous run services, inadequate resourcing and sheer physical distance.

If we believe that everyone should be treated fairly, then we need family support policies and systems that respond effectively to this great and ever-widening diversity.

The Rudd Government has made a commitment to a social inclusion agenda of reaching the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society.

So, is Government capable of delivering more nuanced responses? Surprisingly, given our national prosperity and relatively small population size, this is a major challenge.

It is a major challenge because families are not yet at the centre of policy thinking and resource allocation. It is vital that Government hears the diverse voices of families and avoids top-down policy responses. Getting to those diverse voices and doing things to ameliorate specific concerns will be one of the true litmus tests of the Rudd Government.

III. Getting governments to work together

My third proposition is that family support has to be provided by a joined up system in which Commonwealth and State/Territory efforts are coordinated and mutually reinforcing. In the area of child protection, for example, getting State/Territory and Commonwealth governments to join up their interventions is a major hurdle, which means that interventions are not always well targeted.

While we may be on the verge of better outcomes in this area, Commonwealth-State rivalries remain a problem in other areas which fundamentally affect families and which require national approaches – for example, in education, health and housing.

Another field where greater unity of purpose is needed is in the relationship between Government and the private sector. A new era of cooperation with business – especially in reconciling work and family – is needed, and Families Australia would like to see Government give far more encouragement to business to improve its efforts.

In sum, the Rudd Government has made an encouraging start for families, but it faces at least three significant barriers which may limit the journey – a vision about where families sit in society, the need for supports which target particular family circumstances rather than broad-brush approaches, and the reconciliation of intergovernmental and government-business objectives.

Even more vision and imagination and debate is needed to establish whether we as a nation are happy with where we are placing families. As citizens, we all have a role to play in keeping our voices heard by government so it doesn't fall into the peril of short-term, top-down and disjointed approaches. Thank you.