

ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
RECEPTION FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA
GOVERNMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA
1 OCTOBER 2008

My friends,

I acknowledge the traditional keepers of the magnificent land on which we gather this evening.

And I express my warmest welcome to you.

It is a treat to have you here at Yarralumla on the eve of your National Council meeting and Biennial Conference; and, indeed, on your birthday!

I feel immensely grateful for the opportunity to refresh our connections and friendships.

From a new role that spans our nation, there is:

- . a call upon me for deeper and broader insights;
- . an expectation of myself of keener engagement with all issues, which, by virtue of their vast and diverse territory of origin, are complex and demanding.

Yet I know too there is much I can draw on that will offer context and clarity to Australia's contemporary picture.

My observations and experiences of the work of Early Childhood Australia over many many years are very much a part of this reservoir of understanding.

For 70 years you have been pioneers and leaders in advocacy for the rights of Australian children.

You were at the fore of the international child rights movement.

You were there 17 years ago, upon Australia's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- . convening a national working party of early childhood experts;
- . articulating the detail and intent of that historic global instrument.

You were there again only a year ago when I joined you for the launch of your new Code of Ethics:

- . a system of values and behaviours, built over decades of action and reflection;
- . a guide, a conduit, for the difficult and troubling questions still unanswered.

Your activism and response well preceded what is now widely accepted.

You have always known the critical value of early childhood intervention in education and care.

It's not easy though to sustain one's leadership and relevance; to continue to serve and survive societal change; to use your wisdom well.

Yet you've done so, through your commitment to rigorous review, continuous improvement, consultation, and contemporary, open thinking.

Today you remain at the head table: an initiator and driver of conversation and intrepid debate, research, collaboration, and innovative models for practice.

And you are well placed.

The issues surrounding the health and wellbeing of our children are more challenging than they've ever been.

The report released last week by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare shows us that:

- . our indigenous children are twice as likely as others to be of low birthweight, to be hospitalised for chronic illness, and to die before the age of 20;
- . teenage girls living in remote areas are five times as likely to give birth as their peers in the cities;
- . the gap in literacy and numeracy for indigenous students remains high;
- . there is a significant unmet demand for child care and preschool due to lack of available places;
- . and 15% of Australian children under the age of 15 live in jobless families.

This report - indeed, all that we see and read in our daily press - also shows us that our awareness is heightening:

- . we are recognising what we do and don't know;
- . our achievements;
- . our persisting grave concerns;
- . what we can do.

Again, you're here this week:

- . addressing these issues at your national conference,
- . and contributing to the development of a National Quality Standards Framework:
- . a critical progression in early childhood education and care;
- . a platform and purpose to which you will naturally rise.
- . One of the great benefits of being here for the long haul is your capacity:
- . to see the patterns and interactions of social need, public and political response, and legal reform,
- . and to apply your considerable intellectual and professional resources to participating in those processes, and ultimately, to the solutions that must follow.

ECA members, I admire you:

- . for placing children and families at the centre of your ethos and attention;
- . for encouraging and supporting the role of parents;
- . for the utmost respect you have for the individualism, worth, and competence of every child;
- . and for your constant reminder to us of society's collective responsibility for the raising of its children.

My friends, you have much to learn from one another: a rich reserve to tap into.

I wish you well in your exchanges this week: a vital tonic for your longevity.

Happy Birthday ECA!