

ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
OUR STORIES, OUR RESPONSIBILITIES, INAUGURAL FAMILIES AUSTRALIA
ORATION
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I acknowledge the traditional keepers of the land on which we gather, and the efforts of those who have followed, in valuing and preserving their rich heritage and offering.

Thank you, my friends, for welcoming me at the close of your first day of a most important conversation:

- . a day of rallying past exchanges,
- . of giving them fresh energy, immediacy and usefulness;
- . of gaining one another's trust and respect, the basis - Eva Cox insisted nearly two decades ago - of healthy debate in a truly civil society;
- . of seeking to dream, and do, the extraordinary for Australian children and families.

Over the days and evenings of last week, as Michael and I journeyed the northern region of the Murray Darling Basin, we joined many conversations.

Women and men, young people, families, elders and leaders, paused in the midst of their troubled times to open their arms to us and lead us into their lives and communities.

How privileged and humbled we were to pull up a chair at the table, share a blanket on the riverbank, get sand in our shoes, even have a few laughs, with these people whose livelihoods and spirits have been almost eviscerated by the workings of nature and human action over decades.

I reflected at the end of my term as Governor of Queensland that my impression of those five years was, in the main, as a voice and ear in tens of thousands of conversations.

Today, in a new role, they continue: different threads of a broader, national narrative.

Somewhere in the meeting of minds and touching of hearts, trust and respect put down their roots, nurturing a dialogue that remains always open.

The duty of public office must, at the very least, be to listen to the stories of our communities, to encourage questioning and discussion, and to draw upon the depth and diversity of opinion and experience that is the fabric of Australian life.

People must know that they have been heard, and we must ensure that others have heard them too.

The messages and lessons of these honoured encounters are for all of us to observe.

In the past week, I have seen the human response to hardship and suffering.

I have seen families and communities assembling to support the fragile and destitute among them.

I have seen a collective sense of social responsibility that is palpable.

It is that sense - so much a part of our humanity, yet so prone to quelling by the smugness of good times - that I would like to explore with you this evening. Our social responsibility for the wellbeing of our vulnerable children and families.

Former Justice of the Family Court of Australia, and respected child protection advocate, John F Fogarty AM, recently wrote of some aspects of the history of child protection in this country.

He spoke of intervention measures that were once more about protecting society and property, from children, who were regarded as the emerging criminal class.

He noted the shift in the late 19th century, with the rise of industrialism, to protect children from poverty, cruelty and neglect as their vulnerability was exploited on the factory floors.

Repeatedly, in the 1870s, the 1920s the 50s, and up to more recently for indigenous children, there was a tendency to place young people deemed to be at risk, in orphanages, industrial schools, and large private and religious institutions.

These are our Forgotten Australians, and members of the Stolen Generation.

In 1962 we saw the first authoritative research into child abuse conducted by American, Dr C Henry Kempe and his colleagues. Australian childhood development specialists were conducting their own groundbreaking work too.

The public were alerted to " the battered child syndrome" and the notion of "failure to thrive".

People were deeply disturbed by the revelations, and demanded a serious response from governments.

Specialists across disciplines worked together to develop laws and agencies to protect children, programs to help families, and educational support for professionals.

Fogarty says of this evolution in thinking and response:

The story of change over time is a slow, uneven and frustrating one. It starts with the assertion of absolute authority by the father and a denial of the right of the state to interfere.

It ends with a wide range of powers - legislative, judicial and administrative - to advance the safety and wellbeing of families and children.

In 1990, Australia became a signatory to the most ratified human rights treaty in the world, the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* - and, in taking that step, we recognised that children have the right to:

- . special protection from discrimination, exploitation and neglect;
- . participation in decisions that affect them;
- . prevention from harm;
- . and the provision of assistance for their basic needs.

That we owe them the best that we have to give.

One of the most special memories I have is of being at the UN Commission for Human Rights in

Geneva in 1989.

I was a member of Australia's delegation - an absolute novice - so thrilled to be there, so much to observe and learn.

Mr Mike Smith, the leader of the delegation, invited me to make Australia's statement in the closing stages of the debate on the Convention.

I think he knew how much it would mean to me.

But the debate was delayed, and my accommodation had ran out. It was time to go home. Oh, the disappointment!

I will never forget the thoughtful generosity of Mr and Mrs Smith in asking me to stay with them so I could give the statement the next day.

The scariness of putting up my hand, and switching the light on when it was my turn. The thumping of my heart. I can feel it now.

I continue to be inspired by that powerful but still little understood relationship between grass roots action and international machinery.

Perhaps this partly explains the major concerns expressed by members of the Australian public in their submissions to the 1998 Parliamentary Inquiry into the status of the Convention.

Decent, loving parents perceived an erosion of their rights and responsibilities as primary carers; they feared a personal loss of control and a breakdown of society.

One parent wrote: *As a parent, I feel threatened by "overseas big brothers" trying to force their country's moral opinions on me and my family".*

While this wasn't the intent, of course, there was a strong feeling that the "state" was seeking to inappropriately intervene in the private workings of families.

Proper education about the spirit and effect of the Convention fell well short of what was clearly needed in the community.

Meanwhile, four years earlier, in 1994, Australia had recognised the International Year of the Family, and embraced its themes and objectives through a National Council specially convened for that purpose.

Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Sydney, Dr Bettina Cass AO, wrote in 1994 of the opportunity that year provided:

- . to build and strengthen partnerships between families, governments, community organisations, business and unions,
- . to support and share the responsibility of care for children and other family members made vulnerable by illness, disability or old age.

She spoke of families as "generations of caring", without any prescription as to the form they might take.

She explained a national and universal aim of integrating private responsibility and social responsibility, pointing out that families in an advanced industrialised society cannot be self-sufficient.

Eva Cox, in her 1995 Boyer Lectures, said it was inappropriate to expect that these small, fragile units can deliver a wide range of services through their limited personal resources.

Mick Dodson offered too that while the uninvited encroachment of the state had, in the past, disempowered and impoverished indigenous Australians, he felt that, in the Year of the Family, they were in a better position to insist on negotiation and cooperation.

We were encouraged therefore to open our minds to the possibilities for widening the circle of care of children and families in ways that best promoted their social, economic, educational and emotional wellbeing.

But the Australian public was sceptical, even wary, of what this might mean for their own.

Glaring abuse incited outrage demanding immediate reprisal. Its less conspicuous nuances, on the other hand, left us a little reticent to enter the family's private domain.

We tended to see intervention more as an exercise of power, than as an opportunity for healing and enrichment.

This dichotomy between private and social responsibility is a natural one -

- . complex, shifting, and somewhat subjective;

- . a constant balancing of the principles of liberty and equality, individualism and common good.

However I think this observation applies more aptly to the point at which we might crossover from one to the other, rather than to the essence of the society in which these responsibilities exist.

At Law School I learnt that all persons should be treated equally before the law. This is justice.

As a human rights lawyer I used the law to promote equality in life. I would call this social justice.

Both acknowledge every person's inherent dignity and worth.

A "truly civil society" ensures that these versions of justice operate together, no one without the other.

Raimond Gaita talks of social justice being connected with compassion, a virtue that only a community can exhibit. It's what I witnessed in the towns of the Murray Darling.

It should be the job of our institutions, Gaita says, to enable and encourage us always to see, and in seeing, be responsive to the full humanity of our fellow human beings.

I stand before a great hall of professionals this evening who have worked hard and long to open Australia's eyes.

My friends, Australia's current patterns of inequality and disadvantage are well known to you. And the conditions in which the principles of social justice must necessarily be engaged are well established.

Our economy has prospered while our most vulnerable children and families, in particular, our indigenous, have failed to thrive.

The pressures - of raising children and grandchildren, caring for kin, coping with inadequate income, limited language skills, mental illness, disability, the unceasing demands of modern life - are for some, too great to humanly bear.

Their solutions will span generations to come, as their origins were fostered through generations past.

There are no quick fixes.

But there are new ways of fixing that I know you are determined to pursue, and that are the focus of

your attention now.

With:

- . your well developed concepts of family;
- . your sophisticated aptitude for identifying and measuring disadvantage;
- . your growing understanding of the essence of wellbeing;
- . and your common commitment to positive and enduring societal change,

you have vast reserves to share, and an untapped capacity to deliver coordinated, multi-disciplinary service and care of exceptional quality throughout the nation.

As we question the actions and consequences of our history, and acquire a more discerning view of ourselves and our place in the world, Australians are, I believe, in a phase of revisiting and learning, of openness, and striving to do things better.

Like the stories of courage and despair in the Murray Darling, the plight of our vulnerable children and families belongs to us all.

Hold them up to us, enable and encourage us to see, and urge our humanity to respond.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.