



DIRECTOR'S REPORT

HARRY MCGURK

It is difficult to realise that only six weeks ago, from the time of writing, I was at the other side of the world, still in charge of the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the University of London's Institute of Education. Thomas Coram was an 18th century English seafarer and philanthropist. In 1785 he was responsible for establishing the first foundling hospital for abandoned children in London. When, in 1973, the Institute of Education decided to set up a research centre on child and family wellbeing, the new centre was first located in the grounds of the original foundling hospital, at Coram Fields in Bloomsbury. It seemed entirely appropriate to name the new centre after Coram.

There are many similarities between the Thomas Coram Research Unit and the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Both are involved in research on factors which influence family stability and wellbeing; both work at the leading edge of policy-relevant social science research; and both are concerned to contribute to policy development and service delivery processes by making research findings readily accessible to policy makers, service providers and the community at large.

The Institute's brief, however, extends beyond the conduct of research and the dissemination of findings. Our Family Information Centre is a unique national and international archive of research and related literature and materials on families and their wellbeing. Through the development of its library and information technology services, the Centre has become an important resource for the community of family researchers as well as for legislators, policy decision makers and other groups concerned with the state of the nation's families. In this regard, the functions of the Institute are more extensive than those of the Thomas Coram Research Unit. However, experience as Director of the Coram Unit should nonetheless stand me in good stead in my new role as Director of the Institute.

In the family policy field, the kind of issues confronting Australia today are similar

to those which framed the work of the Coram Unit in the UK. Over the past two decades or so, both societies have experienced increasing diversity in the range of family forms and in the structure of households. This has required a policy response in terms of the kinds of support services available to families. Of particular concern are the needs of families headed by single mothers which, in Australia and the UK, are especially vulnerable to the threat of poverty. In both countries, too, economic necessity as well as increased voluntary participation by women in the labour market, has led to a marked increase in the proportion of dual-earner households.

The needs both of single-parent and of dual-earner families have led to increased demand for affordable, reliable and good quality day care and out-of-school care services for infants and young children; neither in the UK nor in Australia is the supply of such services equal to the demand, and in both countries government is looking to the private market to fill the void. However, whereas in the UK, government has absolved itself from any responsibility for facilitating increase in the availability and accessibility of such services, save in respect of a tiny proportion of children defined as 'in need', in Australia the Commonwealth Government, through the accreditation process and other measures, is going some way towards increasing the number of child care places available as well as enhancing access to them. But there remains much to be done before good quality child care services will be accessible to all the Australian families who need and want to use them. Much needs to be done, too, to ensure that Australian parents are enabled to make genuine choices about the coordination of work and family responsibilities and their preferred distribution between parental and non-parental child care.

Both Australia and the UK are emerging from severe economic recession. However, it is a matter of concern that in both societies not all families are sharing in the process of economic recovery to the same degree. What has happened in the UK, and in Australia, is that the number of dual-earner households and the number of no-earner households (two-parent and single-parent households alike) have both increased. The overall gap between the haves and have-nots has widened, and the proportion of families in each category has increased; accordingly, so has the proportion of children who are being reared in poverty. This is a matter of urgent concern.

Another aspect of poverty in both countries has been an alarming increase in homelessness among young people. The problem

is much more severe in the UK than in Australia, but the blight upon the lives of the young people so afflicted and the urgent need for effective, compassionate solutions are themselves no less.

Australia and the UK are both culturally diverse societies. One of the delights of moving to live in Australia has been to observe the extent to which cultural diversity is embraced and celebrated. Compared with the UK, where racial discrimination and racially motivated violence are sadly commonplace, Australia has travelled much further towards creating a harmonious, multi-cultural society. Much remains to be achieved, of course, but in Australia there seems to be more evidence of a will to ensure equity than is evident in the UK. The context for research on the needs of families from diverse backgrounds is therefore more amenable.

It has not been my intention here to attempt a detailed, comparative analysis of family and social policy in Australia and the UK. Rather it has been to highlight the extent to which family researchers in the two societies confront a range of problems and issues that research in one society can be informed by experience of the other. At the same time, Australian society is distinctive and has its own, unique characteristics. Accordingly, one of the early tasks I have set myself is that of acquiring a more informed and detailed understanding of Australian society and thereby achieve a better appreciation of the policy context within which the work of the Institute is framed.

Appointment to the Directorship of the Australian Institute of Family Studies would be an honour at any time; to have been appointed to this post during the International Year of the Family I regard both as a particular honour and as a challenge. IYF activities throughout the Commonwealth have brought family matters to the forefront of social policy debates. The challenge to me and to the Institute during the remaining months of the IYF, and beyond, is to ensure both that family matters remain at the forefront of the debate and that the work of the Institute continues to contribute effectively and productively to the wellbeing and stability of all Australia's families.

Harry McGurk