



DIRECTOR'S REPORT

HARRY MCGURK

I doubt if there can be many Australians who are unaware that 1994 is the United Nations International Year of the Family. One of the things I found most impressive on arrival from the United Kingdom to take up residence in Australia a few months ago was the high profile which this International Year was receiving, and continues to achieve, in all the mass media. Issues to do with family wellbeing are also the focus of attention at all levels of government. This is in marked contrast with the situation I observed in the United Kingdom.

International Year of the Family comes to a close at the end of December and gives way, in 1995, to the International Year of Tolerance. One of the last major events of the 1994 Year was the International Year of the Family Conference held in Adelaide on 20-23 November. It is appropriate that the theme of the conference was 'Australian Families for the Next Ten Years: Setting the Agenda', because, at the end of the day, the success of the International Year of the Family in Australia should be evaluated not by the number of column inches devoted to it in the print media, nor by the amount of radio and television exposure it attracted, but by the impact for good that it has on the wellbeing of Australia's families now and into the foreseeable future.

As the Year draws to a close it is possible to identify a number of outcomes that can only be regarded as positive in the

short term and that have the potential to have enduring impact.

First and foremost, this Family Year has served to put family matters very firmly on public and political agendas in Australia. Recognition has been achieved of the centrality of family wellbeing to the wellbeing of society. In future, it ought not be possible for social, economic or other policies, at local, State and Commonwealth levels, to be developed or implemented without consideration being given to their impact on families and on family life.

Second, recognition and acknowledgment has been achieved of the cultural, ethnic and structural diversity of Australia's families. With respect to the latter, increasingly it is being recognised that there is not necessarily one best or ideal structure for Australian families that, more than any other, enables the nurturing and caring responsibilities of families to be fulfilled. The fact is that throughout human history there has always been a diversity of family forms within and between cultures. However, such variability is a particular feature within modern, especially industrial and post-industrial societies. Although by far the largest single group of families in contemporary Australia comprises a married couple and their biological children, there is now a wide range of other family structures, so much so that there is increasing difficulty in arriving at an inclusive, consensual definition for the term family. Debate during International Year of the Family has highlighted the potential of all Australia's families to contribute to the nation's social and economic welfare and to its cultural heritage.

Third, focus on families during International Year of the Family has served to highlight the enormous contribution Australian families are making to society through unpaid work in homes and schools and communities. A recent survey set the dollar value of this contribution at 227.8 billion in 1992. These are the kinds of figures we need to keep in mind when considering the costs of families to society.

A further major gain from the International Year has been the increased recognition of the dilemmas faced by many people

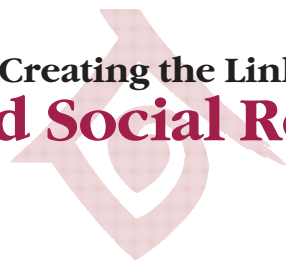
when they try to balance the demands of their family responsibilities with their responsibilities as employees. 'Family-friendly' employment practices are now firmly on the agenda and increasingly employers are having to face up to the reality of implementing International Labor Organisation Convention Number 156 (ILO 156) to which Australia is a signatory. The Convention makes it the aim of national policy to prohibit discrimination against an employee on the grounds of her or his family obligations. A number of larger employers, including a sizeable proportion of State and Commonwealth Government Departments have adopted family-friendly practices.

However, there is still some way to go before all families will have such options open to them, especially those who are employed by small and medium sized companies many of which resist or find difficult to accommodate the introduction of flexible working patterns and the like. Further advance in this domain would be a useful metric to include when evaluating the long-term impact of the International Year of the Family.

Family-friendly employment practices, in tandem with government initiatives to support families in their caring responsibilities, will enable greater choice in achieving a balance between work and family life for Australian families.

In Australia the International Year of the Family must be counted an unprecedented success in terms of its achievement in highlighting and mainstreaming family issues and family-related policies. It is the responsibility of all of us now to ensure that the wellbeing of families remains at the forefront of society's concerns, to ensure that the end of the Year represents the beginning of a commitment to the implementation of all the promise International Year of the Family has entailed for maintaining and enhancing the wellbeing of the nation's families.

Creating the Links Families and Social Responsibility



The National Council for the International Year of the Family launched its Final Report at the National Families Conference in Adelaide in late November.

Titled *Creating the Links: Families and Social Responsibility*, the Report analyses the outcomes of an extensive process of community consultations around Australia, the receipt of 600 submissions, and the Council's own policy development work.

The Report provides a comprehensive analysis of the connections between public policy and family wellbeing, taking into account and respecting the diversity of Aus-

tralian families, and the measures required of governments, communities, workplaces, unions, community and religious organisations, education systems, and the media to strengthen and support family life. Recommendations are made which encompass all levels of government and the linkages which must be made between them.

Immediate family policy priority is given to redistributing resources to families most affected by socio-economic disadvantage, within a longer-term framework of enabling

all families to carry out their tasks autonomously and interdependently. This linkage of private and social responsibility cannot be achieved without adequate resources.

The next edition of *Family Matters* will carry an in-depth report from Bettina Cass, Chair of the National Council, on the issues contained in the Report.

***Creating the Links: Families and Social Responsibility* may be obtained from the Family Services Branch, Department of Human Services and Health in Canberra. Phone: (06) 289 3737.**