

MINISTER OPENS INSTITUTE CONFERENCE

Thank you to the Australian Institute of Family Studies for inviting me to open your conference, *Changing Families, Challenging Futures*. I want to acknowledge the very valuable work the Institute continues to do in the area of family research. And given the Government's renewed focus in its second term on families with children, the Institute, as part of my new Family and Community Services portfolio, now has an opportunity to play an even greater role.

Before I begin, I want to congratulate Ron Burke and the National Australia Bank for their very generous sponsorship of this conference. Only last week, I also had cause to thank them for the support they give to Australians who take on volunteer work in the community.

The Bank's commitment to this kind of corporate support, I believe, helps to strengthen communities and to enrich our families' lives. Its work in the community shows in very practical ways how, in partnership, business and community organisations can revitalise the neighbourhoods in which healthy families thrive.

Government's track record

The Howard Government believes strong families are crucial to maintaining a stable, cohesive and compassionate society. This belief is the bedrock of our social welfare system.

Our first term track record in this area is demonstrable, including the *Strengthening Families Strategy* that helps families cope with pressures of today's society and included the \$1 billion Family Tax Initiative

Important progress has been made in women's employment and family-friendly work practices and the removal of restrictions on the availability of permanent part-time work. Further, the Affirmative Action Agency recently reported that some 326 organisations have now achieved 'best practice' level as employers of women since 1996.

We have substantially increased spending on: the Family Relationships Services Program; the new Commonwealth-State Disability Agreement; and aged care



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— a 21 per cent increase on the 1995–96 year, and over the last three Budgets have spent more on child care than any previous Government.

But I don't want to focus on our past achievements today. What I aim to do is look to the future and consider what we as the Government can do.

Portfolio changes

A positive step is the creation of the new Commonwealth family and community services portfolio. This is designed quite specifically to link social policies and programs to meet the needs of families more effectively.

This welcome move brings together many responsibilities that were not very logically spread across a number of Commonwealth departments. We believed family programs and support services, including child care, were not always linked properly to achieve clear and consistent outcomes.

By creating the new department, the Prime Minister has sent a strong message that a major priority for this term is holistic and integrated support for families.

It means most of the work on improvement to family policies and services will be carried out in the one department. As many of you would know, this includes a major exercise to simplify and streamline the range of family payments.

Family breakdown

Just before the election was called, the Prime Minister said: 'It is an undeniable fact that stable, united families represent the most efficient welfare system that any nation has devised, and that the strain on society and the strain on the welfare system of society of disintegrating families is immense.'

This second term of government will see family support and efforts to avoid family break-up continue. We will be doing this in a number of ways by easing the financial burden placed on families and by supporting families to help them stay together and support each other.

As a parent and a grandparent, I find it terribly sad that so many broken marriages result in children losing part of their family network through separation. Most of us rely on our families, both immediate and extended, to give us the strength and support we need to carry us through difficult times. And when we lose this link through family break-up, our sense of belonging, of self-confidence, can be very seriously threatened.

In addition of course, the breakdown of the family unit is a major contributor to poverty in our country. So the challenge for us all — governments, communities, families, individuals and researchers — is to try, as much as possible, to prevent these breakdowns happening.

One way we can best help is to look at the critical points in lives of families and individuals where access to support and advice has a greater chance of success. Often these critical points occur at certain life stages — for example, marriage, birth of children, approaching adolescence, ageing and so on.

Future policies must take account of these transitions in our lives. For instance, one area that could get some attention is the stage when children first form their views about how good relationships work and how family crises can be dealt with. So relationships education, in my view, is very important.

The Government already provides funds and services directly targeted to these critical stages. These include: the Family Relationships Services which, in delivering

pre-marriage education and preparation as well as mediation in disputes, is designed to support family relationships; Maternity Allowance payments, with links to child immunisation, designed to help with the extra costs of a new baby; the Carer Pension which is paid if you look after someone who is sick, frail or aged in their own home.

The Prime Minister will shortly be considering the report of his Taskforce into Youth Homelessness, convened by Captain David Eldridge. This will give us a good indication of how the community thinks we can best provide assistance to families through the difficult transition period to adulthood. We have tested some ways of providing this type of assistance to families through the Youth Homelessness Pilot Project, and this has proven the effectiveness of helping families early in the process before young people leave home. It is significant that this important first act of the Howard Government represented a key social policy activity.

Election commitments

Our election commitments have reinforced this direction. In recognition of the stress placed on the family unit of today, our new tax plan will ease the costs of raising a family. The plan promises personal income tax cuts totalling over \$13 billion a year, from July 2000, much of which is targeted to low and middle income families.

Families will particularly benefit from marginal tax rates reductions, as well as from the very substantial easing of the family assistance income test and its taper rate.

This reform of the family payments and tax will reduce poverty traps and encourage independence rather than welfare dependence in families. Assistance to families will be simpler and easier to understand. Help will now be available to families through the tax *and* social security systems.

During the campaign we also promised: more help for marriage and relationship education services, and an extension of support services for men in family relationships; more help for counselling, mediation and dispute resolution services; more help for more effective responses to domestic violence; more help to prevent youth suicide; and additional help to extend respite support for carers of young people with a disability.

I believe the positive impact of our package of reforms will make a very real difference to the wellbeing and strength of Australian families. But we are committed to properly monitoring these impacts. And I see a role for continuing research in this area by independent sources, as well as by government – research focusing not only on what is happening in Australia's families, but also on best practice here and overseas on ways in which families can be helped to be strong and self-sufficient.

Social and economic participation

We need to encourage *economic* participation. If we give people the chance to improve their skills and connection to the workplace, they have a better chance of finding paid work. It is particularly important to help some families break the pattern of generational unemployment.

Opportunities for *social* inclusion are also key factors in defining us as social beings. By promoting social participation and interaction, we can assist individuals and families to build vital social networks.

What we want to do is maximise people's capacity to improve their own lives and to participate more fully in the social and economic life of their communities.

There is certainly a role for governments in both these areas, especially if it helps break the pattern of inter-generational poverty and unemployment. But the community and business sectors also have an important role to play in contributing to the prosperity of our community.

The Government has a very real commitment to improving links between community and business organisations. We recognise that Australia has a dynamic business sector with the will to contribute to the community in which it does business. We also recognise that we have a compassionate, caring community sector with a diverse wealth of knowledge and expertise.

Following the Prime Minister's Round Table meeting of business and community leaders earlier this year, we allocated \$13.4 million over four years for a Business and Community Partnerships initiative. This is being used to strengthen the links between the corporate and community sectors by promoting partnerships, and bringing together community organisations,

businesses and governments – in a very practical way – to share in the vast potential for enriching family and community life. This is not just a code for raising money from business but, for example, drawing on the substantial expertise of this sector.

Conclusion

In terms of the Government's contribution, people here at this conference have as good a sense as anyone about the seemingly endless demands on taxpayers' money. So government help for families cannot provide the whole answer.

As the Prime Minister said in his address recently at the ACOSS conference: 'As an Australian society we have moved well beyond the days when government alone attempted to assume sole responsibility for social welfare. It is up to all of us – individuals, families, the community and business sectors, as well as government, to reach out in partnership to those in need and to ensure that no Australian is left behind for want of opportunity.'

We have many challenges ahead of us – I especially recognise this as I take responsibility for this new challenging portfolio of family and community services.

Change brings opportunity. We can revitalise and improve our family relationships and social networks through this Government's integrated and holistic approach to policy development and service delivery – if we all care enough.

We must ensure that couples learn the art of communication, that sharing is more rewarding than selfishness, that a commitment to a partner is the basis on which commitment to children needs to occur. We can work to ensure that parents are prepared and ready for the responsibility, the joy and the pain of parenthood. We must work to see that young people grow up loved and supported so that they can thrive.

By promoting links between government, the community, business, families and individuals, I believe we can regenerate Australian communities and strengthen the country's economic and social future. We have a shared responsibility in working towards this.

These are just some of the issues you'll be examining at this conference. I hope all of you have a stimulating and productive few days. I wish you well for your conference.