

Director's report

ALAN HAYES



I was delighted to welcome Mr Terry Moran AO, Secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, to the Institute on Friday 16 May. Ms Liza Carroll, First Assistant Secretary of the Office of Work and Family, accompanied Mr Moran. It was a good opportunity for staff to meet the Secretary and for Mr Moran to hear about the many research and dissemination projects that the Institute is currently undertaking. Signing of the Memorandum of Understanding with the Department has further cemented the close working relationship of our two organisations.

Families Matter

Support for families is well entrenched in Australian public policy and historically we have led the world in making it a policy priority. It is important not to overlook the importance of families, especially for those who are isolated, marginalised or excluded. The article by Tim Moore, Morağ McArthur and Debbie Noble-Carr in the last edition of *Family Matters* showed that young people who are socially excluded through homelessness place great importance on their family relationships, have a sense of increased connectedness to their family and, significantly, report that homelessness actually enhances their sense of trust of family members.

The UK Government last year launched an initiative called Think Family. This complements their social exclusion and children's agendas. It underscores the importance of considering the family circumstances of socially excluded adults and the ways in which families enhance their life chances and those of their children. Grounded in a family strengths approach, Think Family seeks to encourage services, professionals and policy makers to adopt new and innovative approaches to working with families who are socially excluded. To quote a recent publication by the Social Exclusion Task Force (2008): "excellent children's services and excellent adult services are not enough in isolation. To transform life chances and break the cycle of disadvantage, services must go further. They must 'think family'" (p. 4).

Research news

Fertility and Family Policy in Australia

The launch of the research report *Fertility and Family Policy in Australia* in February generated considerable interest. Its focus on the fertility aspirations of Australians, and how we sit relative to trends in other OECD countries stimulated debate in the media as well as among policy makers and the wider community. May I extend heartiest congratulations to Matthew Gray, Ruth Weston and Lixia Qu on an excellent and timely report.

Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC)

Strengthening Aboriginal Family Functioning: What Works and Why?, by Roz Walker and Carrington Shepherd, published by the Australian Family Relationships



Mr Terry Moran and Professor Alan Hayes with (standing, l. to r.), Ms Liza Carroll, Dr Matthew Gray and Ms Sue Tait.

Clearinghouse, headed the top five list of Australian Policy Online for the period 21–27 February. Funding has been secured for the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse for a further two years, commencing in July 2008.

Family Law Evaluation

There has been substantial progress in the evaluation of the family law reforms since the beginning of the year. The Legislation and Courts Project has commenced its interviews and focus groups with key players in the legal system, including judges, magistrates, registrars, family consultants and lawyers. This is due to be completed by July 2008. The Service Provision Project has completed analysing the first wave of data from a qualitative study of senior executives, managers and staff from organisations funded by the Australian Government's Family Relationship Services Program and has also conducted a web-based survey of all service provider staff members. The Families Project is in the final stages of developing the highly innovative new study, Family Pathways: The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families, with the pilot for the study commencing in late May 2008. The main fieldwork for the first wave of data collection is due to commence in August 2008.

Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)

Fieldwork for Wave 3 of LSAC commenced in March, with the first interviews conducted in Queensland and NSW. The fieldwork is anticipated to run through to October 2008. Following the workshop held in December 2007, after the inaugural LSAC Conference, a second data user training workshop was held in Canberra in February, with positive feedback received from the approximately 30 participants. A third data user training workshop is scheduled for 8 July, to coincide with the AIFS Conference. The

development process for Wave 4 has commenced. The design teams have been re-convened, scoping of content areas is underway and in May papers were presented to the Consortium Advisory Group meeting.

A contract has been signed with the Smith Family to undertake a project on the home-to-school transitions of children from disadvantaged families, using the LSAC data set to investigate this issue. Two symposia on the LSAC study will be presented to the AIFS 2008 Conference. Presenters include AIFS researchers and external collaborators, and the symposia themes are: "Family Life Through the Lens of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children" and "How Australian Children and Families are Faring: Insights from Two National Longitudinal Studies". Several other papers will report analyses of LSAC data. At the time of writing, there are now 220 registered users of the data set. The growth in use of the data has exceeded expectations.

Conferences

Symposium on Relocation Disputes

On 18 April, along with Ruth Weston, Rae Kaspiew and Lawrie Moloney, I attended the Symposium on Relocation Disputes in Australia, held at the Australian National University. Rae Kaspiew gave an excellent presentation. Overall, the symposium was well attended, with the Deputy Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia, one of the Federal Magistrates and several senior staff from the Attorney-General's Department in attendance. Professor Carol Bruch from the University of California, Davis, presented a keynote address that stimulated a great deal of discussion.

13th National Family Law Conference

On Friday 11 April, I presented a paper in a plenary session of the 13th National Family Law Conference, held in Adelaide. Hugh McKay and I shared the session, which was chaired by Federal Magistrate Tom Altobelli. The conference theme was "Families: Broken Blended and Mended" and the session to which I contributed was entitled "Future Issues Confronting Australian Families". I was very pleased by the response to the paper and must acknowledge the assistance of Ruth Weston, Lixia Qu, Matthew Gray, Leah Bromfield, Daryl Higgins, Lan Wang and Nancy Virgona in the preparation of the paper. Around a thousand lawyers and members of the judiciary attended the conference and there was great interest in the Institute and its work.

AIFS Conference update

The Institute is a hive of activity in preparation for the 10th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Families Through Life, to be held at the Melbourne Exhibition Centre on 9–11 July 2008. With over 160 presentations scheduled—along with panel discussions, poster presentations and, of course, some eminent keynote speakers—it will be a great opportunity for wide-ranging discussions about families.

AIFS Conferences are always seen as a key forum for researchers to report on their family research results, contribute to ongoing debate and provide policy input. And our 10th conference appears set to once again be an exciting and vibrant opportunity for researchers, policy makers and practitioners to meet and share new insights with each other.

This year, the conference has been set around five major themes—Family Relationships; Children, Youth & Patterns of Care; Families & Work; Families & Community Life; and finally, Violence & Protection Issues. Within these broad themes, the presentations will cover an extensive range of topics related to families and allow for wide-ranging discussion.

We have secured some prominent keynote speakers who will no doubt inspire interest and debate in their areas of expertise:

Peter Whiteford—Professor at the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW. Previously, he was Principal Administrator, Social Policy Division, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Paris. He is an expert in welfare reform, and the reconciliation of work and family life.

Andrew Cherlin—Professor of Public Policy, Department of Sociology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA. He has published widely on the sociology of families and public policy.

Ruth Weston—General Manager (Research) at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, Australia. She is an expert in the psychology of families, relationship formation, divorce, and other family transitions.

I hope you will join us for what promises to be a terrific event. For further information and registration details, see: www.aifscconference08.com

Presentation of Public Service Medal

On Thursday 8 May, I was very privileged to accompany Ruth and Don Weston to the presentation of Ruth's Public Service Medal by the Governor of Victoria, Professor David de Kretser, A.C., at Government House here in Melbourne. It was a wonderful event and a superb acknowledgement of Ruth's great contribution to research. It was good to see the medal formally pinned!

Ruth Weston receiving her Public Service Medal from Professor David de Kretser, A.C., Governor of Victoria.



We welcome Lan Wang to the Institute. Lan has been appointed as the Institute's Publishing Manager. She has been working in the editing and publishing field since the mid-1990s, and has undertaken a wide range of hands-on and project management tasks for trade publishers and government and non-government organisations. Prior to joining the Institute, she freelanced for five years as an editor, writer, typesetter,

website developer and trainer. She worked in education for several years, including a stint at the Asia Education Foundation, where she organised teacher study tours to Asia. In the early 1990s, she spent three years in Thailand working for the UK-based development organisation, Voluntary Services Overseas. Her career began as a librarian at the Australian National University and the Commonwealth Parliament.

Australia 2020 Summit

I was delighted with the selection of Dr Zoë Morrison, Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA), as a participant in the 2020 Summit. Several others with direct associations with AIFS were also selected. These include former staff members Ann Sanson and Adam Tomison; a member of the AIFS former Board of Management, Frank Oberklaid; and a current member of our Advisory Council, Marie Leech. We are already analysing the recommendations relating to areas in which the Institute is working and to which it can contribute.

Visitors

On 18 February, Ms Sawon Hong, Regional Child Protection Advisor, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific (Bangkok, Thailand) visited AIFS. Her interest was in the operation of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC). Attending the meeting were Professor Cathy Humphreys (Melbourne University) and, from AIFS, Leah Bromfield, Prue Holzer, Susan Fooks and Joan Kelleher.

On 22 April, we hosted a meeting with Productivity Commissioner Angela MacRae and Assistant Commissioner Ralph Lattimore to discuss the Inquiry into Parental Leave and areas of the Institute's work that are of relevance to the Inquiry. We also discussed issues related to fertility and its trends and implications. Again, Commission staff were very interested in the work the Institute has already done in this area. Angela MacRae was a member of our former Board of Management and shows great interest in AIFS and its work.

Director's activities

On 4 March, I attended FaHCSIA's Longitudinal Studies Advisory Group (LSAG) meeting with Diana Smart. The Advisory Group oversees the LSAC and HILDA studies and includes senior policy makers and academic advisors. We provided an update on the progress of the LSAC study, including recent data collection activities, data release, user training, current planning, and dissemination activities. The study's success greatly relies on the efforts of the Institute's Project Operations team of Diana Smart, Carol Soloff, Linda Bencic, Sebastian Misson, Mark Siphthorp and Siobhan O'Halloran. Many thanks to them for their dedication, hard work and commitment to the study.

On 19 March, along with Sarah Wise and Sue Tait, I attended a meeting with The Hon. Maxine McKew, Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare. Discussions focused on the Institute's work of relevance to her areas of responsibility. She was glowing in her praise of our contributions and indicated that she used our material extensively.

On 4 April, I chaired the Advisory Committee of the Child and Family Research Centre at Macquarie University. This is a new initiative co-directed by Professor Jennifer Bowes and Dr Julie Fitness. Established with funding from the then Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), the Centre has a particular focus on young children and their families, emphasising research on parenting and capacity building in Indigenous communities.

On 30 April, with Sue Tait and Matthew Gray, I attended the Prime Minister's address to Heads of Agencies and the Senior Executive Service, which was held in the Great Hall at Parliament House. The full address is available from the Prime Minister's website (www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0226.cfm) or via the Australian Public Service Commission website (www.apsc.gov.au/media/rudd300408.htm). It was an excellent opportunity to meet with other Public Service executives and to hear the Prime Minister give an interesting and challenging address.

Following the address, we met with the Hon Tanya Plibersek, Minister for Housing and Minister for Status of Women. We briefed Minister Plibersek on a range of topics concerning the Institute's work and especially those that relate to her focus on sexual assault, domestic violence and women's workforce participation. In addition to covering matters related to ACSSA, NCPC and AFRC, we also provided a briefing on our recent work on social inclusion and our focus on work and family balance issues.

Concluding thoughts

The Institute's work program continues to expand. While it is excellent to see the interest in our research and recognition of the value of our work, I am committed to ensuring that its quality is in no way compromised. To that end, I am reviewing many aspects of the Institute's strategic focus, operational capacity and organisation. This is timely, given the need to develop our next triennial Strategic and Research Plans in the second half of this year. The first consultations for the Research Plan will take place at the AIFS Conference, in July, with consultation forums to be held around the country in the ensuing months. The Advisory Council will be active in critically reviewing the draft plan. In addition to warmly inviting you to our conference, I also urge you to take an active interest in the consultations that will set the direction for the Institute's research across the next three years.



Reference

Social Exclusion Task Force. (2008). *Think Family: Improving the life chances of families at risk*. London: Cabinet Office. Retrieved 21 May 2008, from http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/-/media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/think_families/think_family_life_chances_report%20pdf.ashx