



# Director's report

Alan Hayes

As I write, I am once again reminded of the inexorable pace of change. My last report highlighted the global recession and explored some of the likely consequences for families. While the downturn continues, the focus is now turning to consideration of the recovery, how it might unfold and the likely continuing impacts, given that unemployment is expected to continue to rise for some time yet.

## Social inclusion, exclusion, inequality and mobility

I am also mindful of the continuing interest in topics related to social inclusion and exclusion, income inequality and intergenerational mobility. The Australian Social Inclusion Board has released a set of valuable background papers and *A Compendium of Social Inclusion Indicators* that provide a first collection of a wide range of Australian social inclusion data. The publication earlier this year of *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, authored by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, provides a fascinating set of insights into the links between income inequality and the costs that societies bear as a result of the gap between advantage and disadvantage. Using data for OECD countries and for states of the United States of America, they argue that less equal societies show higher levels of social, educational and health problems than those displaying greater equality. While the strength of the relationships is open to debate, the general argument is compelling and relevant to the consideration of policy responses to address inequality and social exclusion.

This year, I have continued to speak on topics related to social exclusion, inequality and disadvantage. On 2 April, I addressed the ACOSS National Conference on the topic *Social Inclusion: Possible Impacts and Probable Residues of the "Great Recession"*. In the address, I explored some of the relationships between inequality and exclusion, highlighting the disproportionate impacts of economic recessions on those who were already disadvantaged prior to the downturn. I also highlighted the extent to which this recession might be different to previous ones, emphasising the issues of higher levels of household debt, and greater dependence on dual incomes, overtime and working in more than one job, as well as the implications of reduction in wealth among older Australians for their retirement plans. I also considered the fact that greater safety nets are in place than in previous recessions and that the need for urgency of response has been recognised by our and other governments. In the following week, I presented the keynote address at the NSW Health Child Abuse and Sexual Assault (Adult and Child) Forensic and Medical (CASAFAM) Symposium, held at the University of Sydney, in which I discussed statistics on incidence and prevalence, describing the dimensions of vulnerability, and exploring

the challenges confronting services in responding to child abuse, neglect and sexual assault, all of which can exacerbate exclusion.

Over recent months, two valuable events have focused on social inclusion and extending the policy agenda in this area. The first, the Social Inclusion Research Forum, was held at Melbourne University on 25 and 26 June. The forum was hosted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Social Inclusion Project, a cross-faculty research effort resourced under the university's Social Justice Initiative. It included speakers from the United States and the European Union, as well as from around the country. Professor Hilary Silver, from Brown University, delivered the opening address, exploring what social inclusion means and how it differs from social exclusion. Mr Eric Marlier, Scientific Adviser at the CEPS/INSTEAD Research Institute, in Luxembourg, discussed the development of and learnings from the approach to social inclusion in the European Union. With excellent papers by the international and Australian speakers, it was a very worthwhile event.

Equally valuable was the National Roundtable on Family Violence and Social Inclusion, again held at the University of Melbourne and hosted by FAIR (Family Violence Actioning Interdisciplinary Research), a collaborative initiative of the Department of General Practice, the Department of Social Work and The McCaughey Centre, within the School of Population Health. Chaired by Naomi Eisenstadt CB, Director of the UK Social Exclusion Taskforce, the Roundtable was addressed by the Chair of the National Council to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children, Ms Libby Lloyd, and the Chair of the Australian Social Inclusion Board, Ms Patricia Faulkner AO. Lively discussion followed on the insights from practice for policy, gaps in our understanding of the issues and the appropriate policy responses, the extent to which current frameworks allow concurrent action on family violence and social inclusion, and directions for future research to inform policy and practice.

## AIFS plans

Renewing the Institute's plans for the coming years has involved reviewing our strategic direction and range of research activities and priorities. Following extensive consultation with staff and external stakeholders, AIFS' new strategic and research plans came into effect on 1 July 2009. The new plans align with the financial year, rather than calendar year, consistent with our statutory reporting requirements.

## Strategic Plan

The Institute has set out its overarching direction, and the strategies it will deploy to achieve its goals in the three-year AIFS *Strategic Plan 2009-12*.

The plan outlines the core messages about who we are, what we do and how we work. Our strategic goals are to:

- conduct high-quality research, relevant to policy and practice, on a broad range of issues regarding families in Australia;
- expand, through collaborative partnerships, understanding of factors affecting families;
- increase the effectiveness of our communications to foster greater understanding about factors that affect families; and
- build our organisational capability to achieve research and communications objectives.

Our performance in achieving these organisational goals has been matched to the trend and performance indicators as forecast in our budget statements, and to be reported in our annual reports to Parliament.

## Research Plan

In accordance with the Institute's overarching strategic direction, the new AIFS *Research Plan 2009-12* builds upon and extends the themes of the previous Research Plan and reflects the Australian Government's policy priorities in the work and family and social inclusion spaces.

The title of the new Research Plan is "Sustaining Families in Challenging Times". Under this rubric, the plan frames a wide range of activities, including longitudinal studies, management of clearinghouses, research streams and commissioned projects. These research activities address one or more of the following themes within the plan:

- economic wellbeing of families;
- families and work;
- social inclusion;
- violence, abuse and neglect;
- family transitions and family law; and
- children, young people and their families.

The Research Plan has been developed with extensive input from stakeholders across the country. Consultations took place in all capital cities and a number of regional locations with a range of Australian Government agencies and representatives from local, state and territory government departments, universities, peak bodies and community sector organisations.

The Institute's Advisory Council has also provided extensive input to the development of the plan. Following the Council's endorsement, the Parliamentary Secretary for the Prime Minister, the Hon. Anthony Byrne MP, approved the Research Plan, along with the Strategic Plan.

The Research Plan has been reproduced in this issue of *Family Matters* on pp. 55-65.

## Conferences

Institute staff have been very active in presenting their research at key international and national conferences. Dr Daryl Higgins presented a keynote address, *Disabilities and Sexuality*, to the 19th World Congress for Sexual Health, in Göteborg, Sweden. Dr Matthew Gray presented a paper entitled *The Effect of Relationship Breakdown on*

*Poverty and Social Exclusion* to the 16th Foundation for International Studies on Social Security (FISS) International Research Seminar on Issues in Social Security, held in Sigtuna, Sweden. The seminar theme was "Social Security, Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rich and Poor Countries". Following the seminar, Dr Gray held valuable discussions with the Social Policy section of the OECD and met with Professor Henri Leridon and his colleagues who are managing a new French national longitudinal study of children. These are very valuable links.

Dr Leah Bromfield and Ms Carol Soloff represented the Institute at the Australasian Human Development Association (AHDA) Conference in Adelaide in July. Also in July, a strong contingent from AIFS attended the Australian Social Policy Conference, convened by the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) and held at the University of New South Wales. I was most impressed with the standard of the Institute presentations and the excellent, unsolicited feedback from other delegates. The Institute was also strongly represented at the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Conference, convened by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, at the University of Melbourne. Again, Institute papers were very professionally presented and equally well received.

## AIFS Advisory Council

The AIFS Advisory Council provides specialist advice to me as Director of the Institute. Most recently, the Council's contribution to the development of the Research Plan has been highly valued and most constructive.

As the terms of appointment of the first members of the Council ended on 30 June 2009, there arose an opportunity to align the terms of the council memberships with the three-year period covered by the new Strategic and Research Plans: 2009-12. This arrangement will enable members who advised on the development of the Research Plan to provide advice on its implementation, as well as to assist in the development of the next Research Plan for 2012-15.

As part of this change in our advisory structure, I farewell two members of the Council.

The inaugural Chair of the Council, Ms Dianne Gibson, has been a vital guiding light for the Institute over many years, having also been a member and then the last Presiding Member of the Institute's Board of Management. She has made an outstanding contribution to the Institute over a period of nine years, having guided the development of three Research Plans and Strategic Plans and transition of the Institute to operating under the *Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997*. Ms Gibson made positive contributions to Institute conferences in 2003, 2005 and 2008, as well as to the International Forum on Family Relationships in Transition, held in Parliament House, Canberra, in December 2005. Her insights in the areas of family-related research and wealth of experience in the Family Court, social policy, and the development and implementation of family services have been greatly valued and directly contributed to the calibre of the research outputs



Outgoing Chair,  
Ms Dianne Gibson

from the Institute during her time on the Board and the Council. Ms Gibson's many outstanding contributions to the Institute are most gratefully acknowledged.

Ms Thelma Gertz is also retiring from the Advisory Council. As Coordinator, Indigenous Education, Diocese of Townsville Catholic Education, Ms Gertz has brought to AIFS her leadership in developing policies and practices to improve outcomes for Indigenous children and young people. Ms Gertz's contributions are greatly appreciated.



New Chair of the AIFS Advisory Council, Reverend the Hon. Professor Brian Howe AO

I am delighted to announce the appointment of the new Chair of the AIFS Advisory Council, Reverend the Honourable Professor Brian Howe AO. Professor Brian Howe is a Professorial Associate at the Centre for Public Policy, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne. As well as having served as Deputy Prime Minister of Australia (1991–95) and as a member of the Federal Cabinet (1984–96), Professor

Howe also held a range of ministerial portfolios in the fields of defence, social security, health, housing and community services. His administration of these portfolios was distinguished by a number of major policy initiatives: in social security reform of family payments and the introduction of child support, and in health of the National Mental Health Strategy and the Commonwealth Dental Scheme.

In January 2008, Professor Howe was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia for his services to education and the community as an academic, an advocate for social sustainability and a facilitator of debate about public policy, the development of public administration, theology, and the arts. He brings a wealth of experience and expertise in relation to public policy, particularly in the housing, employment and welfare sectors, including disability issues.

We also welcome a new member, Ms Muriel Bamblett AM. Ms Bamblett is a Yorta Yorta woman who is the CEO of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. She recently retired after 10 years as Chairperson of the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), Australia's national peak body for Indigenous children. Ms Bamblett, who was recently appointed an Adjunct Professor at LaTrobe University's School of Social Work and Social Policy, will bring to the Advisory Council her particular expertise in the area of Indigenous child and family welfare.

To provide for continuity in the Advisory Council, five members have been reappointed:

- Ms Glenys Beauchamp, Deputy Secretary, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs—with oversight of family programs and payments, including implementation of the Government's paid parental leave scheme; child support reforms; children's policy with an emphasis on driving COAG's commitment to implementing the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children; women's programs; disaster preparedness and recovery; community engagement and a range of community-based programs. Ms Beauchamp transferred to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in August 2009.
- Professor Bruce Chapman AM, a Professor of Economics in the Crawford School of Economics and

Government at the Australian National University—a distinguished labour market, social policy and education economist;

- Professor John Dewar, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Global Relations), University of Melbourne—with responsibility for internationalisation, development and alumni, and knowledge transfer as well as an eminent researcher in family law;
- Dr Marie Leech, Principal of Sancta Sophia College within the University of Sydney—with a long career in social policy, research and practice; and
- Professor Paul Smyth, Professor of Social Policy, University of Melbourne, and General Manager, Research and Policy Centre, Brotherhood of St Laurence—undertaking research and development around partnership solutions to Australia's social problems, contemporary Australian social policy, local governance, and Australian and international perspectives on social inclusion.

And, as always, the Institute welcomes the nomination of a delegate by the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to represent the interests of the portfolio. This role has been filled since August 2008 by Mr Ben Rimmer, Deputy Secretary, Strategic Policy and Implementation, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

With the new Council being appointed for the full three years of the new Research and Strategic Plans—1 July 2009 to 30 June 2012—I am sure the work of the Institute will continue to benefit from the impressive range of knowledge and insight around the Council table. I greatly look forward to working with Professor Howe and the Council members.

## Concluding comments

While the new Strategic and Research Plans frame the next three years, a number of major milestones have been achieved in 2009. One that needs to be highlighted was marked by the release of two reports on the National Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (as FaHCSIA Occasional Papers Nos. 24 and 25) that have informed consideration of the continuing value of place-based family and community intervention initiatives. These reports present the findings from one of the most extensive multi-site evaluations of area-based early interventions undertaken in Australia. As such, this evaluation has considerable relevance for policy and practice in this country and internationally. The evaluation reflects the very productive collaboration between the Institute and the lead agency, the Social Policy Research Centre, at the University of New South Wales. I have been delighted that two of Australia's oldest social policy research organisations could work together on this ground-breaking evaluation. This is but one example of the Institute's commitment to rigorous, responsive and relevant research that benefits Australian society.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Howe', written in a cursive style.

## Reference

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *The spirit level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*. London: Allen Lane.